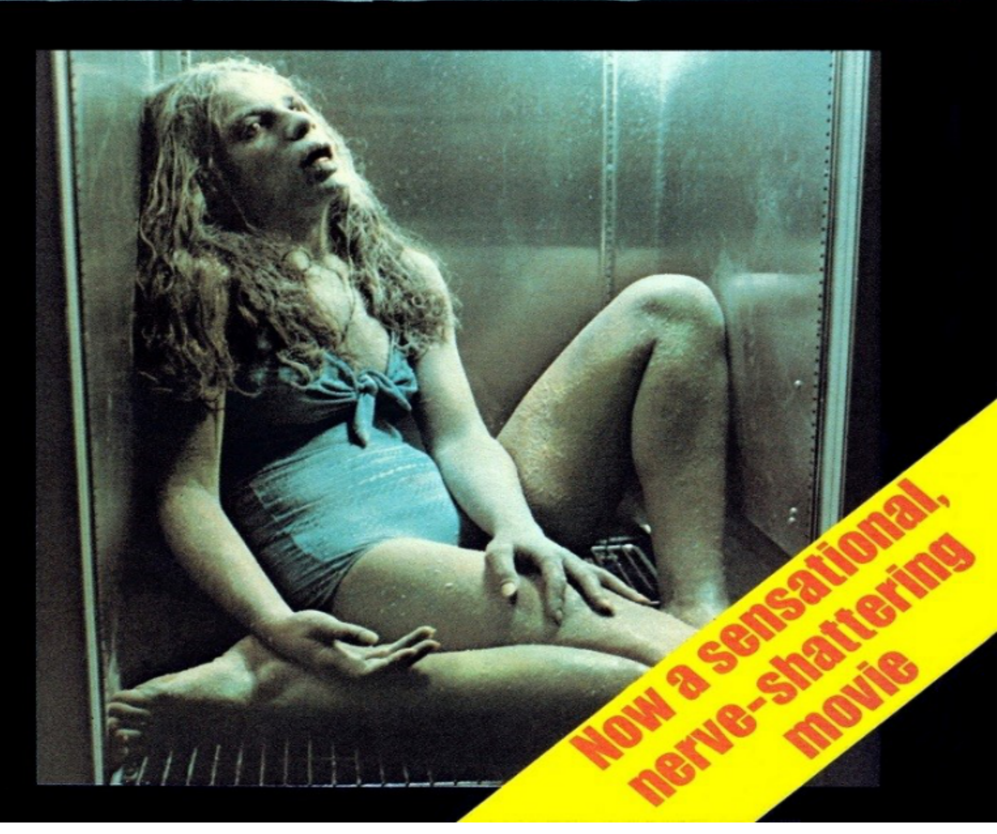
David Cronenberg's

RABID



Mayflower 0 583 12852 1

You can't trust your mother
... your best friend
... the neighbor next door.
One minute
they're perfectly normal,
the next—



Pray it doesn't happen to you!

RABID …

“How you feeling now, mister?” the cabby asked, glancing in his rear view mirror.

Walsh was ashen white and his hands were clutching the back of the front seat. His eyes had completely clouded over with a milky film and it was impossible to see the pupils.

Suddenly his body jolted and dark green bile, flecked with white spittle, bubbled from the corners of his mouth.

The cabby began to pull over to the emergency lane, but it was too late. Walsh grabbed his shoulders and, twisting him round, sank his teeth into the cabby’s face.

The cab slewed across the expressway, missing another vehicle by inches. Hitting a low concrete wall at the shoulder of the road, it rose tail first into the air and cartwheeled onto the wide tarmac road below.

NOW A MAJOR MOTION PICTURE

STARRING **MARILYN CHAMBERS**

WRITTEN AND DIRECTED

BY **DAVID CRONENBERG**

PRODUCED BY **JOHN DUNNING**

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David Cronenberg's

Rabid

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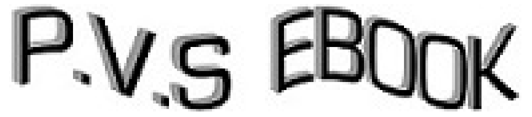
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RABID

ONE

They roared out of Montreal in the early morning, along the multi-laned Decarie Expressway and then onto narrow country roads. Hart Read, leaning confidently over the handlebars of the Norton Commando, felt part of the powerful machine as it weaved and twisted along past trees and fields. His girlfriend, Rose, held the grip at the back of the bike and moved in unison with Hart. The air was sharp and cool and the sky clear. It was going to be a good day.

Hart turned into a country lane and stopped outside a disused workman's hut. Rose swung off and stretched her arms in the air as Hart hoisted the bike on its stand. He looked around at the deserted countryside. They were miles from anywhere. The only sounds that could be heard were the birds singing and the clicks from the Norton's engine as it cooled down.

He watched Rose take off her full-face helmet and shake loose her blonde hair. She was not so much beautiful as sensuous. The upturned nose, the wide blue eyes, the full lips and smiling mouth, gave her the appeal of a fifteen-year old innocent, although she was eighteen, and had the body of a fully-developed woman.

Hart stood against the door-frame of the hut as Rose busied herself with laying out a picnic, pulling coffee flasks, sandwiches and napkins from the top-box on the bike. Hart was twenty-six, but with his fair hair swept back looked like a twenty-year old James Dean.

He had, in fact, wanted to act but had ended up as a mechanic. He did not mind for, apart from Rose, the greatest love in his life was machines, especially two-wheeled machines.

"Do you want some breakfast, or are you going to stand there all day dreaming?" Rose asked.

"Yeah, sure. What you got?"

"Well, there's steak on a bun and coffee. Biscuits, ham, cheese and a pack of cereal if you like."

Hart strolled across until he was standing directly over her.

"Got anything *special?"* he asked.

"Mmmmm. Could be arranged."

He knelt beside her and moved slowly forward. She didn't move, her mouth slightly open, her eyes large and smiling. They kissed, Rose holding a plastic beaker of coffee behind Hart's back. Pulling away, she laid the coffee on the ground and then rolled over on the grass,

arms at her side, fingers spread wide on the grass. Hart lay on top of her, his hands and mouth exploring the body he knew so well. Even after two years with no other girl, Rose managed to arouse in him the excitement of a first-time lover.

By the time he was ready for the coffee it was cold.

They lay in the grass eating, laughing and flinging crumbs at the birds who ventured near them.

"Let's go," Hart said when they had finished breakfast.

Rose packed the picnic gear away, slipped on her helmet and sat on the back of the bike. Hart kicked the engine over and it thundered into life. He gunned the accelerator and the back wheel skewed on the gravel before hitting the hard tarmac. Hart heel-and-toed the bike up through the gears and opened the throttle wide. He leaned the bike hard over on the bends, expertly taking it across corners. The speedometer needle crept up near the ninety mark, but the rev counter indicator stayed below the red danger zone of the powerful engine.

Hart felt Rose's hands on his sides, loosely holding him. He glanced quickly back. Her head was flung back and she was laughing. He smiled.

It certainly was a good day.

A few miles along the road, things were not so good for the family in the VW camper.

"You've passed it! I tell you you've passed it!" screamed the middle-aged woman, hitting a crumpled map.

"We haven't. I know the road. I remember the farm," said the driver with a resigned look on his face.

"I don't remember the farm, daddy," the twelve-year-old girl chirped up from the back.

"No one asked you," the man said.

"Will you just stop and we'll check," the woman said. *"Please."*

"Okay! Okay!" said the driver, swinging the camper hard to the left and slamming on the brakes.

He grabbed the map from the woman and studied it for a few seconds.

"All right," he said. "You want a medal or something? I'm wrong. Now we've gotta turn back. Why can't you navigate properly?"

He reversed the van to the opposite side of the narrow road. Angrily pushing the gear lever into first he jolted the camper forward. As he went to hit reverse gear again, the engine stalled, leaving the van

stuck sideways across the full width of the road.

"Bloody thing! Just had it serviced too," he said as he viciously twisted the ignition key. There was a whining noise but the engine didn't turn.

Swearing under his breath, the man sat back.

"Now what? I suppose we'll have to sit here all day? What a bloody life! What a lousy break! Nothing's gone right with this damn holiday."

It was precisely at this point that Hart Read's Norton appeared over the crest of a hill a few hundred yards from the van . . .

There was nothing Hart could do. A curious, cold calm came over him as he veered left towards the ditch, in the faint hope that he could make it into the field. But Hart was no longer in command. The bike was like a mad bull—nothing could stop it. It hit the drainage ditch two feet away from the bumper of the camper and then lifted into the air.

For a split-second it seemed to Hart that they were suspended in mid-air and that it would just be a matter of bringing the machine down slowly to rest. But the illusion soon became the reality of hurtling through the air at 100 mph. The bike nose-dived into the field, its front wheel crumpling, throwing Hart over the handlebars into the trunk of a tree.

Horrified, the family in the van watched as the Norton cartwheeled with Rose incredibly still on the back. There was a crunching sound as the bike hit the ground and came to rest on top of her, followed by the screaming, whining engine stuck at full throttle.

Rose, the bike lying across her stomach, heard the roaring in her ears, but could not move. A muffled explosion came from the petrol tank pressing into the bottom of her ribs and she saw clouds of black smoke rolling up above her. As her plastic visor began to melt, she slipped into unconsciousness . . .

A strange silence fell on the scene, and it took the family in the van a few moments to snap out of their shock and move into action.

Grabbing a blanket, the man ran towards the burning bike, fighting the desire to vomit.

Just a couple of miles away Dr. Daniel Keloid sat in the expensively furnished offices of the Keloid Clinic. Together with his business partners, he was discussing the possibility of opening a chain of similar plastic surgeries across the country.

Keloid, a young-looking forty-five, was known to the rich, famous and bored as the man who gave new life to tired flesh, new lift to

sagging faces and 'Put nature right'—this last slogan being the brainchild of Murray Cypher the other man in the office. Cypher, a cigar-chewing, heavy-jowled businessman knew nothing of medicine. But he recognized a good investment when he saw one.

It had been Cypher who persuaded Keloid to open his clinic and it was Cypher who had designed the building. Outwardly, it appeared to be a rest home for the moneyed classes, the only hint it was a clinic being the white-coated nurses. Cypher had even tried to change that—

"Put them in red mini-skirts, Dan," he told Keloid. "It's a great gimmick. They'll come flocking." And he meant it.

"Medicine is not a gimmick." Keloid had insisted. The white uniforms stayed.

Now Keloid was again fighting one of Cypher's gimmicky ideas.

"I don't like the idea, Murray. A string of clinics is wrong. The medical profession won't wear it. It's unethical, unprofessional and above all, unsavory."

"Bullshit! I tell you it's a winner. It's gotta happen."

"Well, not with me. I don't want to become the Colonel Sanders of plastic surgery. Finger-lickin' good surgery!"

"Hey, terrific! What a great idea! Wait till I tell the investors about that one. What do you think. Roxanne?"

Roxanne Rushton, the third and remaining partner in the clinic, shrugged. Roxanne, who did not carry her thirty-six years well, had married Keloid when still one of his students. Over the years her respect for Dan as a doctor had increased, but it had been left up to her to liaise with Murray Cypher about the business aspects of their ventures. If it had not been for her, Cypher constantly reminded Keloid, the doctor would still be working in a general hospital treating motor accident cases.

"Look Murray, I think the whole thing has got out of hand," Keloid said. "We're not talking about opening another Holiday Inn. The next thing you know, there'll be Do-It-Yourself Facelift Kits . . ."

"I like it! I like it!" Cypher interrupted. "We'll call it . . . eh . . . Suture Self. Get it?"

"I think we're getting a bit carried away, boys," Roxanne said.

"I agree. We're talking about human life here. Not some new foodstuffs." Keloid said, becoming bored with the talk of money and investments.

"I still say it's a great idea. Now what we do is this . . ."

Cypher was interrupted by a buzz from the intercom.

Keloid pressed the microphone switch.

"Keloid here,"

"Dr. Keloid. It's Steve. There's been a motorcycle accident a few miles down the road. One of the patients, Jackie Brown, saw it through her binoculars. You want me to take the ambulance and get down there?"

"Yeah, sure. Hey, Steve? Hold on, I'm coming with you."

Keloid had snapped out of his boredom. He jumped up and stepped quickly to the door.

Cypher raised his hands to the ceiling.

"Oh, Jesus, Dan. We got a lot of decisions to make. I've a hungry pack of investors waiting in Montreal. What do I tell them. Is it yes or no?"

Keloid looked round at Roxanne and smiled. "Ask the boss," he said. "You and Roxanne work it out. But just don't make the pill too hard for me to swallow, okay?"

Cypher looked at Roxanne after Keloid left.

"What do you do with him, Roxanne? Genius he may be but he gets on my bloody nerves at times. But seriously what do you think of facelift kits? They got abortion kits you know."

"Let's forget the whole idea, Murray."

Cypher shook his head, sadly. "I still say it's a winner . . ."

In the speeding ambulance Keloid watched the column of black smoke for a few moments. Unclipping a fire extinguisher he laid it on his knees and then prepared a few hypodermic syringes. Steve set up an oxygen cylinder and mask. Two other orderlies in the back made ready stretchers and checked the level of glucose drip bags. All this took approximately three minutes.

As the ambulance swung round the last corner, Keloid saw a man hopelessly trying to put out the flaming bike with a small blanket. A woman, sheltering a child from the view, stared helplessly at the man's attempts.

She looked up when the ambulance stopped in front of the caravanette.

"Doctor, doctor," she screamed. "Over there. It wasn't our fault . . . They were speeding. We were stalled."

Keloid glanced blandly at her for a second, before rushing across to the bike. He aimed the extinguisher at the base of the fire and in a few seconds the flames were killed.

It was impossible to tell if the body beneath the bike was dead or alive. Taking a pair of scissors, Keloid gently snipped the crash helmet straps in two and eased the helmet away.

Rose lay perfectly still, unmarked apart from a blackened triangle on her cheek where the visor had melted. Her hair, almost yellow in the bright sunlight, masked her face, giving her an angelic look.

“Jesus, it’s a girl,” the man said. “I didn’t know. Is she dead?”

Keloid ignored the man and felt for a pulse at Rose’s neck. A slight beat told him that she was fighting for life.

“There’s another one over there,” the man said, pointing at Hart lying under a tree.

“Better get him,” Keloid told the orderlies. “She won’t be ready to move for a few minutes,” he added, injecting morphine solution into Rose’s arm.

Hart was vaguely aware of people running towards him. Under his black leather jacket his right collarbone jutted out at an extreme angle and the shoulder hung loose and low. He opened his eyes, but everything was blurred. He tried to undo his helmet straps with his right hand. Pain, which felt like two pieces of broken bone scraping together, shot through him, knocking him into blackness once again.

The orderlies lifted Hart onto a stretcher and carried him back to the ambulance.

“Just broken bones,” one of them said as they passed Keloid. “Can’t tell if there’s any internal bleeding. Thank God he had his helmet on. Went straight into that tree.”

Keloid grunted.

“Here,” he said, looking at the man. “Grab the other end of this bike. Use the blanket round your hands. This thing’s hot.”

The man held the frame under the tank and Keloid hooked his hands under the tangled wires and metal that had once been a back wheel.

“Right?” he asked the man.

The man nodded.

Slowly they lifted the bike off Rose’s abdomen.

“Oh my God,” the man said, walking a few paces before he dropped the bike, turned, and was violently sick.

Keloid looked at Rose and closed his eyes. He had worked for four years in a general hospital and dealt with hundreds of motor accidents. But he had seen nothing like this.

Rose’s abdomen was split open. Charred, blackened and bleeding parts of her small intestine hung over the gaping wound on her stomach. The intestinal tube, normally twisted tight and held by muscle, was now flaccid, like a punctured bicycle tire tube.

The intestine had been ripped apart and Keloid could see the dark brown kidneys at the back, blood seeping over them. A strong acidic

smell mixed with that of the smoke, as the chemicals from the split intestine seeped over Rose's insides.

"Cover her with swabs," Keloid told Steve. "We'll have to operate at the clinic. If she lives that long."

Keloid walked silently behind the orderlies carrying Rose to the ambulance. He knew his clinic was not equipped for major emergency surgery. But if he took her to the nearest main hospital, three hours away, she would be dead. He had no choice. He'd have to operate. And fast.

Inside the ambulance he watched the orderlies slip intravenous needles in Rose's arms, connected to the series of plastic drip bags above her head. Layers of blood-soaked bandages and gauze lay on her stomach. An oxygen mask covered most of her face and a young orderly held her wrist checking her pulse.

Hart sat behind Keloid, propped against the driver's seat, his eyes were glazed and he was mumbling incoherently.

"What's wrong, fella?" Keloid asked, twisting round to look at Hart.

"Where . . . what . . . Rose . . ." Hart stuttered.

"Don't worry, kid," Keloid said. "Everything'll be fine. You're in good hands. Steve, hand me the radiophone would you?"

"Roxanne? Yeah this is Dan. It's a helluva mess. We'll have to throw in everything we've got. Major surgery . . . I know we haven't, but let me tell you what I'm looking at. The gas tank exploded over the girl's abdomen and Christ knows what's left in there. I put her under sedation and shot some coagulants in her to stop the bleeding. We can make a more thorough examination when I hit the clinic in a few minutes. The guy who was driving the bike's got a broken hand, separated shoulder, concussion and all the usual. But he'll live, and Steve'll take him straight onto the General. There's no way out, Roxanne. It's major for her. I'd give her half-an-hour if something isn't done . . . What? . . . Sure, I hope I can remember too. They say it's like riding a bicycle."

The ambulance screeched to a halt a few minutes later. The doors were flung open and a crowd of interested and morbid patients were pushed to one side as the stretcher was lowered. Hart was left in the van.

In the clinic, patients recoiled with horror as the stretcher and its bloody passenger wheeled by them. The Keloid Clinic was renowned for its air of gracious living and blood was not something patients normally saw, unless it was their own.

A man with thick tape round his ears, the result of a minor facelift, turned away when Rose passed him.

“Couldn’t they throw a blanket over it at least?” he asked a woman with thin surgical wires attached to the upper and lower eyelids of both eyes, a temporary consequence of the removal of bags under the eyes. The woman nodded her head in agreement.

Keloid followed the stretcher.

“Take her straight to pre-op, boys. Tell Dr. Karl to set up the gas and all his bits and pieces. She’s going to need the works.”

Roxanne had already changed into her operating gown when Keloid entered the surgical scrub-up room.

Keloid quickly scrubbed himself and slipped into a green gown, which an orderly tied at the back for him.

“What are you going to do, Dan?”

“Neutral field graft.”

“What? It won’t work. You can’t.”

“Have you seen her? The kid’s dying out there. It’s her only chance. She’ll end up a basket case if we don’t operate. I had a look at her kidneys in the van. At least *they* seem to be relatively undamaged, but the small intestine is blown to bits.”

“It’s no good, Dan. I’m not convinced. Neutral field grafts have *never* been used internally. We could end up with a terminal cancer patient on our hands.”

“For God’s sake, Roxanne! We’re giving the kid a chance. What the hell has she got to lose? She doesn’t have enough small intestine left to absorb nutrient food.”

“Are you sure, Dan. We can’t have this on our conscience if we make a mistake.”

“I know,” Keloid sighed. “That had crossed my mind too. There’s no other way. The *jejunum* and the *ileum* are completely ruined. That means her bowel now has nothing attached to it. So we close her up the way she is. What happens? She’ll have to be fed for the rest of her life intravenously. And that wouldn’t be for long. A month at the most, I would say. But if we graft neutral field tissue cones in the abdominal cavity and monitor her carefully, there’s a chance the cones will register her condition through post-embryonic induction and develop into a new set of intestines.”

“Or run wild and produce some nasty malignant tumors. Dan, the clinic can do without this risk. Let’s play safe. Close her up and send her to the General.”

Keloid ignored her. His mind was made up. He’d take the risk. After all, he wasn’t the Colonel Sanders of medicine, was he? This was definitely no gimmick.

The operating theatre at the Keloid reflected the opulence of the rest of the clinic. Pink tiles covered the walls from floor to ceiling and the latest chromed operating lights shone down on the patient. A bank of electronic monitoring equipment stood against one wall, and a theatre nurse sat in front of it checking heartbeat, blood flow, oxygen flow, respiratory condition and encephalic transmission—although, of course, it was too soon to tell if there was brain damage.

Keloid nodded at the team of five as he entered the theatre. He stood by the table looking down at Rose. He knew he was right. There was no way he could condemn this beautiful child to a life as a vegetable.

Three hours later, the operation was drawing to a close. The damaged tissue and membrane had been removed, the remaining parts of the intestine kept 'open' to allow the villi, which makes up the mucous membrane, to remain alive. Altogether fourteen feet of dead intestinal coil had been removed. After death there is normally twenty feet. In life this is twisted together to form a coil of only a few feet. Rose was, by any medical terms, a freak. Her life support system for as long as she survived would have to be a series of tubes, needles and drip bags—unless Keloid's theory was right.

The last stage of the operation was the removal of large squares of skin from Rose's thighs. Keloid skilfully cut to below the level of subcutaneous fat, and then peeled back the square of skin, leaving a red patch of loose fibrous tissue on Rose's thigh which would eventually heal.

"So far we've cleaned her up. Now we're coming to the interesting part," Keloid explained. "Everyone here is familiar with the standard techniques of skin grafting. What we're about to do is something unique. I've just taken full-thickness grafting material from the patients thigh as you've seen. But I'm not going to put the graft into the damaged area of the patient's stomach, abdomen and so on. I'm going to have this thigh skin—and more that we'll remove—treated so that it becomes morphogenetically neutral. Any questions so far?"

Keloid was rising to the occasion. He was the lecturer in front of his admiring audience. Not five hundred clinics spread across America and Canada could bring him this feeling of satisfaction and fulfilment.

"Can we treat the tissue here, Dr. Keloid?" asked William Karl, the clinic's anaesthetist.

"No, Dr. Karl. The tissue will have to be frozen and sent to the Sperling Institute where they have the technology for such procedures. That's why we can't close the intestine left in the patient's body. She'll have to be kept in an operation-ready state until the Sperling has

neutralized the tissue. It'll take a couple of weeks, but it can't be helped."

"Dr. Keloid," said one of the theatre nurses. "I'm sorry but I can't quite grasp the functional difference between neutral field and normal graft tissue. I wonder if you could explain it a bit further?"

"Sure. We send the patient's thigh skin tissue to the Sperling in special aluminium containers. They treat it there—and I won't bore you with the scientific details—so that it loses its specific composition both as thigh tissue and skin tissue. For example, if treated thigh skin was grafted to a cheek, it wouldn't just be thigh skin with a different color and texture from the face. It would actually develop as facial tissue. So in other words," Keloid concluded, "neutral field tissue has the ability to form any part of the human body that it is grafted to. It's just like the tissue of a human embryo during the first weeks inside the womb."

There was a stunned silence after Keloid had finished. The implications were enormous.

"But Dr. Keloid, this is fantastic. You don't surely believe that neutral field tissue can be grafted successfully onto this patient?" William Karl asked. "After all, she's lost most of her intestinal mucosa. The small intestine is an extremely complex organ, as you know. Are you saying that neutral tissue can reconstruct it?"

"That's exactly what I'm saying, Dr. Karl. Under the right circumstances neutral tissue is capable of reconstructing a number of complex organs. I've done it myself using lab animals at the Sperling Institute."

"With no side effects?" Karl asked.

Keloid looked across at Roxanne, who turned her head quickly away. He ignored Karl's question and busied himself with taking more squares of skin from Rose's thighs and placing them in the metal canisters which would later be driven to the Sperling Institute for the start of one of the most bizarre experiments in the history of human medicine . . .

TWO

Rose, her body a maze of plaster and gauze, remained in an operation-ready state for two weeks. Glucose and saline drips kept her alive and a clear plastic measuring bag at the side of the bed monitored her fluid outflow. Keloid had done a good job. The temporary colostomy was holding well. All nutrients—in the form of intravenous drips—were passing straight through the stomach into a tube hooked up to her navel cartilage. After breaking down the necessary foodstuffs, excess liquid flowed along the tube into the bowl at the side of the bed.

It was, of course, life in its most basic form. No more than sheer existence.

Rose's room was like all the others in the clinic—carefully designed to look like a five-star hotel bedroom. Subdued panel lighting on the ceiling and two mood lights at either side of the bed gave a warm glow, while thick carpets on the floor deadened the footsteps of the nurses and doctors who often entered to check Rose's condition. A consistant *beep-beep* came from a cardiograph machine in the corner.

The one indication that Rose was not merely another kid in for a nose job or a facelift was the hand-written sign on the door which read INTENSIVE CARE: QUALIFIED PERSONNEL ONLY.

"She's responding well," Keloid said during one of his visits. "The neutral cones come back from the Sperling today. We'll be able to operate tomorrow. Any sign of consciousness yet?" he asked a nurse.

"No, Dr. Keloid. She's been the same since we brought her in."

Keloid leaned over Rose, examining her closed eyes.

"No Rapid Eye Movements, nurse?"

"Not that I've noticed."

Keloid frowned. "Strange. Very strange. Means she's not dreaming. I hope her brain's okay."

That was the same fear Hart Read voiced when he saw Keloid a week later. Hart's right hand was encased in a wire cage which supported his fingers. His right shoulder bulged from a massive bandage strapped round the dislocated collar bone. He was subdued, his features drawn and pale as if he had not slept for days.

He slumped back in a large leather armchair and looked across the huge polished antique mahogany desk at Keloid.

"When will Rose ever be fit again, Dr. Keloid?"

Keloid shrugged, fidgeting with a buff folder in front of him.

"Will she wake soon?"

"Hard to say, Hart. She's in some kind of coma which I reckon is half deep sleep and half comatose. Could be weeks before she comes round."

"You mean you don't know. Jesus."

"No, we don't know. It's too early to say. She's still in a state of total shock. Don't forget we only operated for the second time under a week ago. When we brought Rose in, we did the best we could. It was impossible to perform major surgery—we're not equipped for that—so we did the next best thing. Radical plastic surgery techniques can work and so far Rose is bearing up well. Good God, Hart, we saved her life."

"Yeah, yeah, I'm sorry. But what about her brain, Dr. Keloid? Is that damaged?"

"Her helmet probably saved her from any serious damage, but until she's fully awake . . ."

"You mean you don't know that either. What a fucking mess," he sighed.

"Now listen Hart, Rose is getting the best attention possible. We've done, and are doing, everything that is medically possible within our scope. She's going to live."

"Why is she here? Can't she be moved to a city hospital?"

Keloid shook his head. "Impossible. The body's still trying to recover its strength. The grafts we put in last week seem to be taking well and developing nicely. We're monitoring them electronically, and there's no doubt that new tissue growth is taking place inside her abdominal cavity."

"You mean her insides are growing again?"

"We won't know for a while. But the signs are good," Keloid said. "What we're waiting to see is whether this new growth will mature into functioning intestinal mucosa. Do you know what I'm talking about, Hart?"

Hart shook his head.

"Intestinal mucosa helps break down the food we eat. The longer the small intestine, the more complex the food that can be absorbed by the body for its needs. Rose at the moment has only enough small intestine to digest the most basic nutrient material. I'll put it another way. Every creature has intestines. Cows, for example, have an incredible amount, and that's why they can break down grass and other vegetable matter. Human beings only have relatively medium

length intestines, so they eat meat and a limited variety of vegetables. Vampire bats—the real ones, not Dracula and company—have very short intestines in relation to the size of their body, so they drink whole blood, which is very easy to break down and assimilate. Rose is in exactly the same state."

"Are you saying that if your grafts don't work, she'll never again be able to eat like a normal human being? She'll be on tubes and needles for the rest of her life?"

"That's about it, Hart. What can I say? There's no magic involved. I've followed the latest medical techniques. And I promise I'll be in touch the instant Rose shows the slightest signs of coming round. Okay? Now, would you like to come along and see her?"

Hart nodded and followed Keloid.

"Any changes, nurse?" Keloid asked as they entered the room.

"Afraid not, Dr. Keloid. But the readings are getting stronger on the growth monitor."

Keloid studied some charts. Suddenly Hart grabbed his arm.

"Look, Dr. Keloid! Her eyes!"

Keloid rushed to the edge of the bed. Rose's eyeball were moving wildly from side to side, underneath the closed lids. Her head twitched slightly in time with the frantic motion of her eyes.

"Excellent," said Keloid, smiling. "She's dreaming. That's promising, Hart. It shows the brain is functioning."

"Doctor, can I have a couple of minutes alone with her, please?" Hart asked.

"Okay—but just a couple of minutes."

When Keloid and the nurse had left the room, Hart stood looking at Rose, a heavy feeling in the pit of his stomach. He remembered the morning of the accident, when they had made love in the grass, she so full of life and laughter. It was difficult to imagine that the bandaged creature in front of him was the same girl.

Slowly he lifted the sheet from her body. He winced as he saw the tube sticking out of her navel. He put the sheet back and gazed at her face. It was pale, and for Hart, had an odd beauty about it. Bending low, he kissed Rose gently on the lips, fighting all the while to stop himself crying.

Keloid was waiting outside, as Hart left.

"Right, Hart? She's coming along just fine. I told you not to worry. I've done this sort of thing before, you know."

Hart nodded.

What Keloid did not add was that he had only tried it on animals, and this was the first time he had attempted such a complex graft on a

human being.

At that moment, Murray Cypher bustled round the corner, half an unlit cigar sticking out from the corner of his mouth.

“Hi, Dan, how’s it going? Ah, there you are Hart. I’ve been looking for you. They got what’s left of your bike outside. They’re loading it in the back of my station wagon. What you going to do with it? Use it for an ashtray? Ha-ha!” he laughed forcibly.

“Give it to a friend for parts. I can hardly stand the sight of it.”

“Right! Let’s move. My investors wait for no man. Seeya Dan. Keep up the good work!”

Keloid smiled. Cypher may be good with money, but he did get on his nerves at times . . .

No one saw Rose open her eyes and stare ahead at the ceiling in her moonlit room. There was no one to record her first few seconds of panic as she looked round, eyes rolling wildly, her head perfectly still. No skilled nurse or doctor to comfort her as she stared, frightened and confused, at the tubes leading from her arm to the saline and glucose drips. No words of explanation for her when she saw the round screen of the cardiograph for the first time, its luminous green blob floating across a graph in time to her heart beat, its persistent *bleep-bleep* filling the room.

But perhaps it would have made no difference if anyone *had* been there . . .

Most of the patients and staff were asleep when Rose snapped into consciousness. Two weeks had passed since Keloid had grafted the neutral tissue in Rose, and her condition had remained static. Only the movement of her eyeballs gave any indication that her mind was active.

The wounds were healing well and her abdomen had been closed. Electronic monitoring of her intestines showed rapid growth of new tissue. Even Roxanne allowed herself to give Keloid cautious congratulations. As far as Keloid was concerned, now it was simply a case of careful nursing and Rose would be completely fit sooner than they had all expected.

“We have passed the worst stage,” he told the staff. “We can sleep easy knowing we’ve saved her life.”

The night that Rose regained consciousness the clinic was quiet. The night nurse sat in reception reading *Time* magazine by the light of a small desk lamp. The corridors were dim and there was a feeling of warmth and security. Only Lloyd Walsh, an actor in his late thirties, paced restlessly up and down his room. Tomorrow his facelift

operation was due and, despite his outward bravado, he was terrified.

He picked up a book and tried to read, but it was useless. Sitting in front of the large mirror, he turned the dimmer switch at its side full up. Neon strips, hidden behind opaque glass round the mirror, brightened the room.

Walsh looked carefully at himself. Not bad, he thought, for thirty-seven. If it wasn't for those pouches under the eyes and the wrinkles at the ears, he could pass for under thirty. He smiled at himself. Too much booze, too many women, not enough early nights in bed alone—that's why you need a facelift, he thought. Ah well, the price of fame is high . . .

He pulled his cheeks to the side, trying to imagine what he'd look like after the operation. Pretty good, he reckoned. Pretty good. He leaned back in his chair and imagined the women he would attract, the pleasures that awaited him after a few slices of the surgeon's knife. Life could be worse, Lloyd Walsh thought. It definitely could be worse.

It was then he heard the scream.

It was a muffled, broken cry coming from the room of the girl biker who'd been in a smash. Walsh opened the door and looked along the corridor. It was deserted. He glanced at the night nurse's table. She was gone, probably on her rounds. Could be anywhere, Walsh realized. He'd better have a look and see what the scream was about and then phone for help if there was any trouble.

The screaming stopped and the clinic seemed totally silent. As he approached the Intensive Care Unit, however, he heard sobbing and moans. Without thinking, he pushed the door open.

The room was chaotic. Smashed blood plasma bottles lay on the floor, intravenous bottle stands had been knocked over and bandages lay scattered around, some with blood stains on them. But it was the sight of Rose that made Walsh freeze.

She lay in her bed, twisting and turning as if possessed. Sheets were wrapped round her legs like streamers on a maypole; she was violently ripping the bandages from her arms and pulling out the long feeding needles from her veins. As Walsh stood dumbfounded Rose flung one of her arms to the side, knocking the small bed-light off the table and smashing it.

In the hard light of the moon Rose looked like a mummy struggling to life. Walsh snapped out of his temporary shock and rushed to the side of the bed. He stopped her from pulling out the last of the tubes from her arm. Grabbing her by the wrists, he felt her hot, sticky blood oozing from the punctures left by the needles.

"Hey, hey, hey," Walsh said. "You're okay now, baby. Relax. You're in good hands. Take it easy. You don't want to go pulling these things

out. That's your life, baby. This juice is keeping you in the land of the living. Now lie back, kid. That's it. Nice and easy. There we go, that's my girl."

Rose let herself be pushed down by Walsh. Her eyes, which had been staring wildly, relaxed and she looked up at Walsh. He held her hand as she tried to speak.

"Hart . . . Hart? What . . . what are you doing? Where are we? Are we all right? Will we . . ."

"I'm not Hart, honey," Walsh said smiling gently at her. "Hart's back in Montreal, waiting for you. He's been up to see you every day. I think you got something big goin' with that guy. I'm Lloyd. A friend of Hart's and yours. Okay?"

"Where's Hart? Is he all right? Hart, oh. Hart . . ."

"I told you, honey child. He's in Montreal. Nothing wrong with him. We had a rap on the phone this afternoon, him and me. Told me to keep an eye on you. He's coming down tomorrow. Don't worry. He's in good shape."

Rose looked down at Walsh's hand holding her own.

"I must have been dreaming. Noise, screaming, pain, the motorbike, Hart's body . . ."

Walsh sighed and, taking his hand away from Rose, he crossed her arms over her chest.

"That was no dream, kid. That was memory. You and Hart were in one helluva bike crash. Lucky for you the clinic was only a few miles away. You'd be dead by now."

"Crash? Was there fire? I can smell burning flesh, my flesh. And . . . was there . . . blood? I taste blood. Lots of blood."

"That's it. You're remembering. There was a God-almighty blaze and you were pouring blood like the Tivoli fountain. But you're okay now. This is Dr. Keloid's clinic. He fixed you up. I'd better call him now, you're bleeding again," Walsh said as he stood up to leave.

Rose clutched Walsh's arm and pulled him down on the bed. He was staggered by her strength. Rose sat up and the sheet which was covering her fell to her waist. Her small, firm breasts glistened with sweat in the moonlight.

"Lloyd, Lloyd, hold me. Please. I'm freezing. So cold, so cold, so cold," she mumbled as she rested her head against Walsh's chest.

Walsh looked round the room helplessly. "I don't . . . I think I'd better get some help . . ."

"Hold me, Lloyd," she whispered. "I need some heat, You're so warm, so warm." She slipped her arms round Walsh.

"Okay, just for a minute," Walsh said.

They sat for a few seconds, rocking slightly. Walsh didn't feel Rose tug the last intravenous needle out of her left wrist behind his back.

"Look, this is crazy," Walsh said, becoming embarrassed at the situation. "You're not even sure where you are, are you?"

"I'm with you," Rose said simply, and pulled Walsh's face down towards her, locking her hands behind his back.

"This has got to stop, Rose. You need some attention, I'll just . . . Jesus! What's that? My side hurts. Here, let me see."

He tried to struggle away, but Rose held him close, her eyes bright, her breathing heavy and excited.

"Rose? Whatya done? I think I . . . I cut myself or something. Is there something sharp down there? Oh Christ! That hurts. Let me go, damn you! *Let me up!"*

He tried to force himself off the bed, but Rose clung to him, her interlocked hands pressing hard into his back. They rose off the bed together.

Walsh was not even aware of the blood dripping from his dressing gown onto the white sheets from the spreading patch beneath his right armpit. Moaning with pain, he lost consciousness and collapsed on top of Rose, who was trembling and whimpering like a woman making love.

Rose lay back, smiling, her cheeks flushed. She sighed and resting Walsh's head on her shoulder, began to lightly stroke his hair. She stared at the ceiling, watching the shadows of the trees in the moonlight.

It was pure coincidence that the moon was full . . .

Keloid was puzzled. There was no immediate explanation for Walsh's wound and the fact that Walsh could not remember how it happened did not help give a clear picture.

Keloid had been wakened just after dawn by the night nurse.

"You'd better come quickly, Dr. Keloid. Lloyd Walsh has had an accident. He's in Beatrice Owen's room at the moment, in a pretty bad way."

As Keloid dressed quickly he wondered what the hell Lloyd Walsh was doing in Beatrice Owen's room. Were his patients indulging in some night games behind his back? These damned actors, you couldn't trust them for a minute. Then he thought of Miss Beatrice Owen, a dragon of a lady in her mid-fifties, with arthritic hands. No way, Keloid concluded, could there be any goings-on in that particular direction.

Walsh lay on Miss Owen's bed, his eyes glazed and his mind

obviously confused. He didn't look at Keloid when the doctor entered.

"Bring him to the Examination Room, nurse. I want to look at him properly. And clean up Miss Owen's bed after you've done that," he added, noticing the smeared blood over the covers.

The Examination Room was a hospital designer's dream. No expense had been spared in the belief that as this was the first contact a potential patient had with the clinic, it should be comfortable, luxurious and stylish as well as functional. The examination table, the cantilevered light above it, the chairs, cupboards and even the curtains were all color coordinated.

"You've no idea at all how this happened?" he asked Walsh.

The actor shook his head. Keloid asked one of the orderlies to search the clinic for any leads.

"You weren't sleep-walking, were you? You may have fallen against something outside and come back in again without waking. It has been known."

"Not with me, Doctor. It's never happened to me before."

"Well, let's take a closer look," Keloid said, swinging a large illuminated magnifying glass over Walsh's right armpit.

The wound was behind the armpit below the shoulder, and perfectly round. Whatever had done it had cut neatly through the muscle, almost to the bone of the rib-cage. Blood seeped slowly out over the edge of the wound.

"Get me some stuffing and a couple of sponges," he said to a nurse. "This blood's not clotting at all. We'll have to shoot some coagulants in him to stop the flow. Damn weird. You haven't been leaning on any picket fences, have you, Lloyd?" he asked smiling.

Walsh's sense of humor was lost at that moment.

"No, Doctor, I haven't," he said flatly.

"Does this hurt?" Keloid asked, pushing a wooden tongue depressor into the edge of the open sore.

"Can't feel a thing."

"You can't?" Keloid sounded amazed. "Can you feel anything?"

"I got this strange kind of tingling all the way down my right side. Apart from that, nothing."

"I see. Nurse, come over here a second, please."

They moved away from Walsh.

"I think he's had a stroke, Louise. What I don't know is whether it's temporary. We'll have to get him to the General. There's not much we can do here, I'm afraid. Before you plug the wound take 10cc of blood directly from it. I want to check out the composition. There's traces of

a green fluid at the back which I can't figure out. And hold back on the coagulants. The General will want to do an ECG to check the blood flow to the brain." He looked at Walsh who appeared to be sleeping.

"Louise, go with Steve in the ambulance. Load up well with plasma, and keep pumping it into Walsh."

The nurse nodded.

As Keloid was turning to examine the wound again, there was a knock at the door and the orderly that had been searching for the cause of Walsh's accident leaned in.

"Dr. Keloid, you'd better come right away."

"What's wrong, Kenny? Found something?"

"Yes, sir. But you'd better see for yourself."

Keloid sighed. "Okay. Let's go."

As they walked along the corridor, the orderly filled Keloid in on the result of his investigation.

"I found nothing in the grounds," Kenny said. "No blood, no sharp objects, nothing. Then nurse Rita called me. She'd found something all right. But she wants you to have a look. In here," he said, pointing at Rose's room.

Keloid went straight in. Kenny hung about outside keeping others away until the doctor had finished.

Keloid looked around the room in disbelief. IV bottles, stands, bits of bloody gauze and bandage lay over the floor.

The wall beside the door, and around the door handle itself, was smeared with blood. A trail of blood led across the floor from the bed.

Rose lay asleep in bed, new IV needles and tubes in her arms. Keloid walked across to her and noticed the wild gyrations of her eyes under the lids. He checked her pulse. Strong and normal.

"Watch your feet, doctor. The police will probably want every piece of glass and strip of gauze exactly as I found it. I wouldn't touch a thing if I were you. Fingerprints, you know."

"What the hell are you talking about, Rita? Police? Why should the police be involved?"

"Don't be naïve, Dr. Keloid. I've seen this sort of thing before. A normal guy in hospital. He has a few drinks, starts thinking of women, gets randy and goes on the hunt. He can't find a nurse and feels that no one will ever know if he rapes a girl when she is in a coma. Poor kid. It's disgusting."

Keloid did not bother to comment on the nurse's theory. He knew the danger of jumping to conclusions, especially in a clinic. Word gets round, the patients get jumpy and before you know it, the papers are

down creating scandal stories. Keloid could picture Murray Cypher's face at the thought of any hint of that sort of trouble.

He pulled back the sheet from Rose.

"Amazing. I've never seen wounds heal so quickly. The grafts have taken beautifully. There shouldn't be any need to rebandage, nurse," he said, shaking his head with wonder. "Absolutely amazing. Not even any sign of scar tissue. I must get her over to the Sperling. They'll be fascinated.

Nurse Rita looked at Keloid as if he were mad. The girl had just been molested and there he was rambling on about showing her off!

Keloid lifted Rose's left arm. He breathed in sharply. "I'll need to make a thorough examination of this later. Might be a problem."

"Rejection problems, Doctor?" Rita asked, without much interest. She was still thinking of what she imagined Rose had gone through.

"No, I don't think so," Keloid said slowly. "There's an extreme swelling of the lymph nodes under the arm. It's quite a bump. I'll look at it more closely after I've had some coffee. Kenny!" he shouted. "You can clear up now."

"But . . . but . . . Dr. Keloid. The police. Lloyd Walsh . . ." Rita stuttered. "He could be a . . . a . . . rapist. A sex maniac."

Keloid looked stonily at Rita for a few seconds.

"Now look, Rita, I want you to get this straight. You've no proof that Lloyd Walsh did what you said. This mess does nothing to explain how he got his wound, which you haven't seen, by the way. I know that Lloyd wouldn't do something like that. He's not that kind of man. It's impossible for him to act in the way you think. I would say a discreet, thorough and very private investigation is in order. Right?"

Rita lowered her head. "Yes," she said quietly.

"And not a word to any of the patients. And that goes for you as well, Kenny. Got it?"

They both nodded.

Roxanne was waiting in his office.

"What the hell's going on?" she asked. "Mysterious injuries, Kenny standing guard outside Rose's room, Steve rushing off to the General. What's happened?"

"Let me pour myself some coffee first and then I'll give you the story."

When he'd finished telling Roxanne, she looked worried. "Dan, you don't think that Rita was right? What if Lloyd Walsh really did . . ."

"Of course he didn't," Keloid said angrily. "If that girl was interfered with, then I'll give up medicine tomorrow. He may have had his stroke while he was strolling around the corridors. In a desperate

attempt to get help, he could have stumbled into Rose's room, fallen over the IV stands and cut himself on the bottles."

"But you said the wound was clean. There was no glass, was there?"

"Hmmm. You're right. An explanation will probably come to light. Right now I'm more worried about that swelling under Rose's arm."

"A wild carcenoma?" Roxanne asked, not attempting to hide the fear in her voice. This was the one thing she prayed would not happen.

"No, it's definitely not a cancer. Carcenoma wouldn't develop that quickly. There's a small lesion at the top of the bump, not a big opening and it's certainly not gangrenous. But . . ." he trailed off into thought.

"Then what do you think it is?" Roxanne asked after a few moments.

"What?" Keloid broke his train of thinking. "I'm fairly convinced it's just a local infection. We'll clear it up in the next few days. I'm probably making too much of it. I'm sure there's nothing to worry about."

Brilliant doctor though he was, in this instance Daniel Keloid could not have been more wrong . . .

THREE

The day brought no change in Rose's condition. Keloid studied the samples of blood found in her room and taken from Walsh. There was nothing unusual about them that he could see, but he sent the specimens to a specialist haematology lab in Montreal to make sure.

"What are you looking for, anyway?" Roxanne asked him.

Keloid shrugged. "I don't know. Call it a hunch, a sixth sense, but I'm sure that there must be a lead to Walsh's accident in that blood somewhere."

"What about the green fluid you found around the wound?"

"Yes, that's the most interesting aspect. It contains cholesterol and bile salts."

"Bile? I don't believe it. How could bile secretion get from Walsh's stomach to his armpit?"

"You're assuming that it was his," Keloid said quietly.

Roxanne just stared at him, her mind incapable of even beginning to understand what Keloid was implying.

Steve came back from the General Hospital and reported that Walsh had not stopped bleeding throughout the journey.

Kenny cleared up all traces of the mess in the intensive care unit and by the afternoon the clinic was as normal. Keloid performed a facelift operation and reshaped a twisted nose.

Post-operative patients, with bandages on various parts of their anatomy, sat around the open-air pool playing backgammon, chess, cards or just watching others swimming. Admissions were made, cars called to collect those who had been discharged and visitors came and went.

Through this Rose slept, her eyes moving wildly, dreaming dreams that brought no rest.

It was late in the evening when the dreaming stopped. Rose opened her eyes and stared at the blank ceiling. Without moving her head, she slowly began to pull the intravenous needles from her wrists and arms. They came away cleanly, with only a few drops of blood falling to the sheet.

She turned and looked round the room, eyes hooded and heavy. Panic seized her and she sat upright. Flinging the sheets aside, she

swung out of bed, her knee-length bedgown made almost transparent by the light of the bed lamp.

She stood, slightly unsteady at first and then walked to the door. Turning the handle quietly she found the door would not budge—the night nurse had locked it. Breathing heavily with frustration she opened a cupboard to the left. Inside was a standard Keloid Clinic nylon jacket and a pair of house shoes supplied for patients. Rose put the jacket over her gown, zipped it up and slipped into the shoes.

She padded silently across to a half-framed door marked FIRE ESCAPE beside the bedroom window. Pushing it open, she ran quickly down the metal stairs, her chest heaving. She whimpered softly, like a puppy left in the cold.

Her body screamed for relief from the pain that consumed it, her skin feeling as if a thousand worms were forcing their way out through the pores.

Rose felt a need more basic than life itself, and her tortured mind was filled with only one thought. The need for strength, the will to survive. But even she did not as yet know the full price required to fill that need.

The full moon spread its hard light across the black fields and skeletal trees of winter. As Rose walked along the deserted country road, the scurrying of night creatures came from hedgerows and ditches. An owl screeched in the distance.

A long, low shape appeared to the left with a rough dirt track leading up to it. A feeble light flickered from an oil lamp and as Rose approached she made out the outline of a barn.

Pausing, she stared at the building for a few seconds, wondering if she should go in. The racking desire inside her gave the answer. Slowly, she moved forward and pushed open the worm-eaten door.

The floor inside was covered with filth. The ceiling was low-slung and thick, grey cobwebs hung in profusion from its beams. Another oil lamp hung over the stalls. Two black and white cows lay on straw, and as Rose approached them, a scrawny chicken suddenly leapt from the shadows and bolted past her.

Breathing heavily but with more control, Rose stood over the cows, a smile on her face. They looked up at her, but knowing instinctively that it was not milking time, lowered their heads on the straw.

Rose walked round the animals and then between them. Sinking slowly to her knees, she stroked one of the cows with her left hand, undoing the zip of her jacket with the other. Laying her head on the bristly hide she continued stroking, muttering softly under her breath.

She stretched her right arm along the length of the cow's spine. Snuggling her head into its body, she raised her left hand and pushed

it gently towards its tail, in semblance of a grotesque crucifixion scene.

Rose trembled as she arched her body back from the cow. After a moment's hesitation she pushed sharply against its side, her left arm and breast pressing hard into the beast.

She sighed and felt her body relax. The cow twisted its head back to see what was happening, but with a look of bovine stupidity it snorted and lay down to rest again.

Rose writhed in orgasmic ecstasy, her eyes closed, her mouth slightly open. A small pool of cow's blood began to form on the floor beneath her left arm.

Warmth spread through Rose's body, the warmth of fresh blood. Starting around her heart, she felt the soothing fluid dissolve the aching pain. For a few minutes she wallowed in this new sensation, her cheeks becoming flushed, her body sinking heavily on the top of the cow.

Then suddenly she shuddered and, opening her eyes pushed herself away from the animal. In the cow's side a small, dark opening glistened in the feeble light. Blood mixed with green bile-like fluid dripped down from the wound. The cow stirred at Rose's sudden movement, and shifted uncomfortably.

Rose staggered to her feet. A dark, mottled pink tube, covered with blood, retracted into a hole at the top of the lump under her left arm.

The feeling of pleasure had given way to one of revulsion. Her stomach heaved and she stumbled away from the cows. The whole barn seemed to be spinning around her as she leaned on the back of the stalls, one hand clutching her abdomen.

A violent wave of nausea erupted from her stomach and she vomited noisily over the filthy barn floor, coughing up a watery mixture of saline, glucose and blood, tinged with viscous blobs of green bile. A sharp, acid smell similar to ammonia, wafted upwards, making Rose want to vomit even more.

She sank to the floor beside the stinking puddle, tears coursing down her cheeks, her breath coming in racked sobs. She could not understand what was happening, her mind refused to believe what she had just done. But worse than the mental pain was the barbed aching she felt suffuse her entire body. It was the same pain that had driven her from the clinic, the same need that had forced her to seek relief from the cow.

If only she could ease the torment! Her body screamed for blood. For the taste had returned, making her dribble saliva from the corners of her mouth in anticipation. The taste of blood . . .

With shocking suddenness the barn lit up. Rose focussed on the

figure at the door standing behind the light of the solitary electric bulb.

An old man stood propped against the door, a stone flagon in one hand. His unkempt white hair was matted, and he wore a torn jacket and a grimy collarless shirt open at the neck, brown mud-stained trousers were tucked carelessly into a pair of earth-spattered rubber boots.

"All right you! Hold it right there! Wachya doin' on my property?" The farmer snarled as he stumbled forward, swaying from side to side until he stood in front of Rose, his legs wide apart. He swigged a gulp of whisky.

"Well, well, well. What we got here then?" he chuckled, suddenly sly and friendly as he contemplated the girl's firm young body. "Running away from home, then? Not got much on, have you?" His eyes bored through Rose's thin night-gown.

Rose looked up at him, a strange smile playing on her lips.

The farmer sunk to his knees and waved the flagon in front of her.

"Wanna drink, little puss? This'll warm you up, sure enough."

The smell of the man's stale breath made Rose wince, but she didn't move away.

"Fred Atkins is the name," the farmer continued. "Same as me old pappy, God rest his soul. And this here," he waved his arm round the barn, "is my little patch. Twenty acres of the worst fucking land around. It drove my wife away and it's driving me to drink," he laughed.

Atkins shuffled along closer to Rose and sat beside her. "You know, sometimes a man gets lonely with nothing but cows and chickens for company," he said putting his arm round her. "You sure you don't drink? C'mon. Drink to old Fred," he said, laying the bottle on her chest.

Rose had still not moved, her face remained impassive as she watched and listened to the ramblings of the old farmer.

"Well, I got something you can take a drink of, and it sure ain't whisky, heh, heh," he cackled coarsely.

He slumped over and kissed Rose on the cheek. The grey stubble of the farmer's two-day growth scratched her chin, irritating her. But still she did not move.

Atkins was surprised that she showed no resistance. He could not know that inwardly Rose felt nothing about what was happening. A heavy weariness had spread over her, a lethargy that almost dulled the ravaging pain.

To Atkins, she was just another runaway kid who knew nothing of

life. Well, he would teach her a few things. He dropped the stone bottle on the floor and began nibbling at her collarbone, his calloused right hand roughly pressing against her breast. Through the cotton he felt the heat of her chest and squeezed hard into the nipple.

A stirring that he had almost forgotten existed began around his genitals.

"Oh, that's nice, honey child. Real nice," Atkins slurred. "You like me, don't ya? I can tell these things. Now let old Fred here make you happy," he said, dropping his head onto the breast, his tongue licking and slobbering over her nipples.

Still she had not moved. Then she looked down at Atkin's head moving around her breasts. She noticed the dirt-encrusted scalp between the unwashed hair, smelt the foul smell of his body. His only saving grace was that he was human and blood flowed through his veins, ensuring his survival in a parody of life.

With a slow, deliberate movement she ran her fingers through the old man's hair. He moaned with pleasure, thinking she was responding to his attentions.

Suddenly Rose grasped the farmer's hair and viciously pulled his head down to her left arm, smothering his face in her armpit.

"No! No! No!" the old man cried in agony. But Rose held him tight until he stopped screaming. Her eyes were bright and she gasped with pleasure. The pain was easing, in its place came a surge of strength like the strength she had discovered with Lloyd Walsh.

They lay in silence for a few moments, locked in their grisly embrace. Eventually, Rose pushed the fanner away and stood up.

Atkins propped himself against the stall, his hand covering his right eye. Blood, mixed with green fluid, poured through his fingers. He began to rock backwards and forward, moaning softly.

Rose looked at the man as if seeing him for the first time. She covered her mouth with her hand and stifled the horrified scream which rose in her throat. She backed away, eyes bulging with terror, her body shaking. The farmer was oblivious to her.

She turned, stood on a chicken which had been sleeping in the straw, and ran sobbing from the barn.

The farmer stopped rocking and lay perfectly still. Eventually, through his drink-sodden brain, he became aware of a sharp, throbbing pain from the back of his right eye. He took his hand away from his face, and something flopped against his cheek.

He tried to scream, but the shock had silenced his vocal chords. His hand was covered in thick blood. Hesitantly, he brought it back to his right eye. He felt a partially round, jelly-like object that had once been

his eye. A sticky substance oozed down his cheek.

Fred Atkins did not know it, but his right eye had been gouged, right back to the optic nerve containing the main blood supply for the eye. And he certainly had no way of knowing that, as he slumped in unconsciousness, diseased blood would flow through his body. In a few hours time it was to reach his brain.

Rose ran through the night, along the roads she had come, until she reached the clinic. Flitting from tree to tree, she found the fire escape to her bedroom and quickly climbed the steps. She stood, pressed against the wall, her heart pounding, weeping quietly to herself. She tried the door. It was still locked. She had to get help. She had to speak to Hart, he would help her. He would come and take her away from this nightmare.

Rose walked to the fire escape door, hesitated, and then, her mind made up, slipped out again. The clinic was silent as she ran round searching for the main entrance.

Outside, she peered through the glass doors into the reception area. An empty desk with a small lamp stood against a wall. A pair of knitting needles lay on a chair.

On the desk Rose saw what she needed—a telephone. She looked desperately at it, and impulsively dashed through the door and picked it up. Crouching low behind the desk, she dialled Hart's number.

"Hart, please, Hart, answer. Oh God, make him answer," she cried softly into the mouthpiece.

In Montreal, Hart found a buyer for the bits of his bike. He sat in the lean-to garage attached to the small house he had rented along with Rose a couple of months before the accident. This was where, when not with Rose, he spent his happiest times. Surrounded by bits of machinery, spanners, oil cans and motorbike manuals. Hart was at peace. This was *his* sanctuary. Even Rose had recognized the fact, and had never entered uninvited.

Hart had fixed up a couple of stereo speakers to an FM tuner and as he checked the Norton manual, he hummed in tune to the loud rock music which blasted out from the local music station.

He worked without feeling. The bike that he'd loved meant nothing to him now. The engine lay on a bench before him, with about a dozen cardboard boxes around it to hold the individual pieces. The frame lay propped against a wall, twisted beyond recognition.

The cast had been taken off his hand, and the only remaining indication that he'd been involved in a major accident was a stiffness

in his right shoulder.

Hart sat back and looked round the garage. One wall was covered with cork tiles on which messages, diagrams and pictures were pinned. He gazed at a photograph of Rose and himself taken when they had first met. She was leaning over the bike, her elbows on the saddle, smiling cheekily out at the camera. He was standing behind, holding a crash helmet under his arm, with a grin across his face.

Hart chuckled as he remembered the reason for the cheeky grin. Rose and he had just made love for the first time. The memory snapped him back to reality and he winced at the thought of what she would be like when she came out of the coma. Christ, he hoped she would be okay. He couldn't think of carrying on without her.

The beat of the music filled the small garage. He yawned, stretched himself and checked the time. Another hour, he thought, and then to bed. He started humming in tune to the radio as he unscrewed another piece of engine.

He was totally unaware of the phone ringing in the house.

For five long minutes Rose let the phone ring, before replacing it in its cradle.

She shambled out of the front door and back to her room. Putting the slippers and jacket in the cupboard, she crawled into bed.

Her limbs felt heavy and her eyelids closed. The horror she had felt in the barn had passed, the revulsion that made her try to call Hart had gone. Now she wanted to sleep. She was satiated, bloated like a leech. For a while at least, she was satisfied. Until the next time . . .

FOUR

Fred Atkins woke in the middle of the night, wondering what he was doing lying in the barn. One of his cows stood over him snuffling and snorting. The other animal lay a few feet away, its huge rib-cage heaving, its nostrils wide and its bloodshot eyeballs rolling wildly. Fred could not understand what was wrong with his vision and why his hand was covered in caked blood.

Dragging himself to his feet, he staggered the few hundred yards to his farmhouse. Kicking the door open, he ran through the hall, knocking a chair over, and turned on the light in the bathroom at the back.

He stopped, the panic almost solid in his throat when he saw the horrific apparition staring out at him from the dusty mirror. He tried to scream, but could only make a rasping sound. He fainted, and as he fell his head struck the corner of the bath.

Dr. Keloid looked down at the sleeping Rose, her cheeks flushed and her lips smiling. It was impossible, he kept telling himself.

"She must have pulled them out in her sleep," he told the nurse on duty, pointing at the IV needles dangling uselessly from their stands. "Put them back in and let me know the minute there's any change in her condition."

Keloid walked thoughtfully back to his office. He had never heard of anyone surviving major post-operative surgery without a life-support system. It did not make sense, no matter which way he looked at it.

Keloid checked out on Walsh.

"We've put him under sedation," a doctor at the General told him. "But we can't seem to stop that wound bleeding, although we've pumped him full of coagulants. It's just a trickle, but I've never seen anything like this."

"What about his ECG?" Keloid asked.

"Normal, the brain's responding to every stimulant we give him."

"Has he still got no feeling down his right side?"

"That seems to have cleared up. I reckon he'll be out in a day or so, if the bleeding stops. Then you can have him back for your piece of sculpturing."

Keloid ignored the tone of professional bitchery, thanked the doctor,

and hung up.

When Rose woke, she knew the living nightmare had started again. The pain, the awful need, was back, only this time stronger. Her guts felt as if they were being torn apart and her arms seemed to be on fire. She stared crazily at the IV needles in her arms and realizing that part of the searing pain was coming from the glucose and saline drips. Angrily she pulled them out.

She eased herself out of bed and tried the door. It opened easily! Trying to stop herself trembling, both through excitement and the overpowering need in her body, she padded silently down the corridor.

It was still night and the clinic appeared deserted.

She stood in the centre of the hall wondering which way to go. Signs indicated squash courts, swimming pools, relaxation centres, games rooms. There was no mention of operating theatres—a point Murray Cypher had insisted on.

From her right she heard the sound of water running and headed towards it. A sign saying WHIRLPOOL ROOM pointed in the direction Rose was walking.

She stood outside the swing doors, listening to the sound of the running water. She heard a girl singing and, carefully opening the door a fraction, looked in.

The whirlpool room was the ultimate in luxury. The walls were covered with leather, and chromed chairs and smoked glass tables were clustered round three full-size whirlpool baths. A bar stood at the opposite end of the room, a large television set into the wall above it. Modern paintings hung on the walls and *art nouveau* sculpture was placed round the room.

A young girl wearing a yellow mini-bikini lay in one of the baths. Her head rested on the cushioned edge and she was smiling, enjoying the swirling pressure of the water playing over her body.

Rose opened the door a little more, checking that the girl was alone. The room was deserted. She watched the girl adjust some controls on a panel above her head and sigh with pleasure.

Rose walked in, closing the door behind her.

The girl looked up, surprised to find anyone else awake so late at night.

"Hi," she said. "I thought I'd take a bath when no one's around. It's my op tomorrow afternoon. I feel so nervous. But daddy *insisted* I have my nose done." The girl looked annoyed. "And I was here last year for the same thing! I don't know what daddy wants! But he said I would

find out. I'm Judy Glasberg, by the way. I don't think I've seen you around before. Have you just arrived?"

"I . . . was in an . . . accident." Rose said haltingly.

"I heard about you. You know you shouldn't be up," Judy said. "You've been in a coma for weeks. You don't look good to me. Are you feeling all right? Why are you staring at me like that?"

The hollows under Rose's eyes seemed almost black in the subdued orange light of the room. Judy suddenly felt very exposed, very vulnerable in her bikini. She crossed her arms over her breast.

"I'm sorry," Rose said, "I didn't mean to frighten you. I was just thinking about the water. It looks so good. My name's Rose. What did you say your name was?"

Judy felt a shiver run down her back. She wanted to get away from this woman, go back to her room and lock herself in. Why wasn't there a nurse around?

Rose began walking to the sloped edge of the pool. Judy slipped down in the water to cover what she felt was her nakedness.

"You know, Rose," she said nervously, "I feel as if I know you. I mean, you've been here for so long. I saw them bring you in right after the smash. Oh, I'm sorry, maybe you don't want to talk about it."

"It's all right," Rose said flatly. "I don't mind. It happened a long, long time ago. Do you mind if I get in with you? I've been lying in bed for ages and my body aches. I must have peace, relax my body."

She started to walk slowly into the pool, the hem of her gown floating on the surface as she moved towards Judy down the angled floor. Her arms hung limply at her sides and she reminded Judy of the creature in a late-night horror movie she'd seen called *The Mummy*.

"Are you sure it's okay for you to have a bath?" Judy asked. "I mean with your wounds and all. You know what Dr. Keloid's like when it comes to keeping the rules. Does he know that you're here? Does he even know that you're *awake?"* Judy's voice was becoming high-pitched, reflecting the fear she felt.

"I don't think anyone but you knows I'm awake," Rose said, smiling. "The place seems dead. It was kind of spooky waking up alone in the dark not knowing where I was or how I got here. I'd have thought it was all a bad dream if I hadn't bumped into you. You're a nice kid. Hey!" she laughed, "you know what? I can feel the heat of your body coming right to me through the water. You know what that means?"

Judy was frozen with terror, and could not answer.

"It means that you and I have got a special bond," Rose said, standing about a foot away from Judy. "That's really great. I'm *so* glad you're here," she added, bringing her right arm out of the water.

The action galvanized Judy into movement.

"I . . . I think that I'd better be getting out," she said. "My skin's getting all wrinkly." Judy groped for her towel lying by the side of the pool.

"Stay a little longer. Please. You haven't even told me your name."

"I did!" Judy said emphatically. "It's Judy. Judy Glasberg. Pleased to meet you. Maybe we'll catch up with each other later. Right now I'm splitting."

Before Judy had a chance to pull herself out of the water, Rose had slipped her arms around her, and pressed her close.

"I'm pleased to meet you as well, Judy."

"Let me go! This is far out. You're getting me embarrassed. I'm not into these scenes. Why don't I put on some clothes and we'll grab ourselves a couple of drinks. Okay?"

Rose's answer was to hug Judy more tightly.

"Now look, Rose. This isn't funny any more. *Let me go!"* she shouted, trying to push Rose away.

Rose locked her hands together behind Judy's back. The girl tugged at Rose's arms and kicked the slippery floor of the pool in an attempt to escape from what she was convinced was a madwoman.

"I want to get out. Just let me get dressed," Judy said, almost crying. "Listen, to tell you the truth, I reckon that you're still not right. You shouldn't be here at all. Why don't you let Dr. Keloid . . . aah! aah! What's that? Something's cutting into me! It's sore. You bloody stupid bitch," Judy yelled. "Will you get the hell off me?"

Judy began to hit Rose with her fists. The girl was desperate and fought like a mad cat. Her feet slipped and they both went under water, Rose never relaxing her maniacal embrace.

When they surfaced, Judy was gasping for air, her face red and her strength ebbing. Trickles of blood ran down her back where Rose's nails had dug into her skin.

Rose pressed down, forcing Judy to be still for a few moments. From under Rose's arm a fleshy, cigar-shaped tube had slipped out of an angry red sheath. At the end of the semi-transparent sucker hard white barbs had formed into a row of sharp spikes. The barbs had cut deep through Judy's flesh and brown elongated glands situated at the base began pumping dark green fluid into the blood that was being drawn up along the tube.

Judy was almost unconscious, her head flung back in a last effort to get away from Rose. Rose's knuckles were white with strain as she held onto the girl. She felt the fresh blood flow into, and through, her body and closed her eyes in ecstatic joy. She was not aware of the

girl's head slipping under the water or of Judy's dying spasms. Judy stiffened, her whole being rebelling against inevitable death. But it was useless. Her remaining strength sapped. Judy went under for the last time, sagging heavily in Rose's arms. A few bubbles rose to the surface, mixing with the oxygenator of the whirlpool.

Rose, her cheeks flushed, opened her eyes and relaxed her grip on the girl. Stepping back, she let go. Judy rolled over and floated face down on the surface of the whirlpool, moving round with the currents in a macabre dance of death.

The sucker under Rose's arm, now empty, slid back into the sheath, its grisly task completed.

After a few deep breaths, Rose became aware of Judy's body. Startled, she grabbed her victim's hair and pulled her to the side of the pool. Half-carrying, half-dragging her out she fell on the girl and tried to bring her back to life using mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. Judy did not move. A thin stream of blood oozed from her side and trickled over the tiles into the pool. It was then that Rose realized Judy was dead.

She began to cry and picking Judy up by the shoulders she shook her in a futile attempt to bring her back to life. But after a minute or two her remorse mysteriously evaporated. She looked up and looked at the dead girl.

"Stupid fool!" she said angrily. "You shouldn't have struggled. I only wanted to get rid of my pain. I didn't want to kill you."

Her anger became determination, and tucking her hands under Judy's arms she began dragging the girl backwards out of the Whirlpool Room, mumbling to herself.

"I didn't mean to kill her. I didn't mean to kill her. I didn't. I never killed the other two. They're still alive. I know it. I'd be locked up if that wasn't true. I didn't mean to kill her. I've never hurt anyone. Never."

Lloyd Walsh was irritated. He paced up and down the observation ward of the General, trying to ignore the babblings of the other patient, a man in his early thirties, who had been in a motor accident.

"Well, I reckon I can get a few thousand dollars from that sonofabitch driver," the man said. "Jesus, a man can't walk across the road safely, nowadays. Eh, Walsh? You'd think a guy had some rights. Jeez, I only went out to get the kids some ice cream. You know the stuff, the chocolate cream with nuts. You like that, Lloyd? I love it. Are you listening? I wish you'd stay still. You're driving me nuts with that walking of yours. Fancy a game of poker? I got a pack of cards

somewhere in my jacket."

Walsh grunted and continued pacing.

"Say, what's with you, buddy?" the man said. "You suddenly lost your tongue or something? Heh-heh, I know a joke about a chick who once swallowed . . ."

"I'm going," Walsh interrupted.

"Going? Going where?"

"Out. Away from here," Walsh replied, packing a flight bag that he'd brought from the clinic.

"But you just can't go like that. I heard the doc telling you they couldn't figure out why you were bleeding all over the place. Shit man, you're losing blood. And what's that stuff they've been pumping into you?"

"Plasma."

"Yeah, plasma. What's that supposed to do?"

"Feed my blood. But I'm starving. My guts ache. Gotta have some food."

"Call the nurse. She'll get something from the canteen. You really oughtn't to be going like this."

"I don't want hospital muck. I want some real food. I wanna get the taste of something good in my mouth."

The man shrugged. "Still say you're nuts, Lloyd. Wait until the blood stops at least."

"It's practically stopped. Just a trickle now. No trouble at all. I'll be okay," he said pulling on his trousers.

"How's your arm?"

"Fine, just fine." he said curtly, picking up the overnight bag and opening the door.

"If the night nurse comes round I'll tell her you're in the john. Is that okay?"

"Great. Take care of yourself."

"Yeah, good luck Lloyd. Maybe we'll meet up and you can introduce me to some of your actress friends," he chuckled lewdly.

"Maybe," Lloyd said, and left.

He walked along the corridor of the hospital. No one took any notice of him and he reached the main entrance without trouble. The night was cold and, as Walsh breathed heavily and erratically, puffs of steamed air came from his mouth.

He stood on the pavement, looking to his left and right, not quite sure where to go. A persistant thump-thump inside his head made him screw his eyes together in pain. His stomach felt as if it were being

drawn out by a series of meat hooks.

A white cab pulled into the side and let a uniformed night hospital worker out. Walsh waited until the man was clear and then slumped into the back seat.

"Where to, buddy?"

"Camelford," Walsh said without thinking, that being the nearest town to Keloid's clinic.

"Okay, here we go!" the cabby said, moving into the main stream of the traffic. The streets were lit up with Christmas decorations, and late night shoppers bustled along the pavements. Father Christmases stood on corners ringing handbells and selling Japanese toys. Window displays encouraged passers-by to spend money and bars were filled with revellers determined to start their festivities early.

Walsh noticed nothing of this. He sat in the back, pressing against the parcel shelf, rolling his head from side to side, trying to shake the awful pain in his brain.

"Christmas again," the cabby sighed. "I dunno where I'm going to get the bread. Gets worse every year, don't it? You know what my kid wants? A stereo player. Would you believe it? A goddamned stereo player. And she's only seven! Says all her pals have got them. What do you do?" the driver asked shaking his head. "I suppose I'll have to get one for her. You got any kids, mister?"

When there was no answer, the cabby looked in his mirror. Walsh was slumped in the back seat, his eyes closed, shaking his head.

The cabby shrugged and hummed in tune to Frank Sinatra singing 'The Second Time Around' on the local radio.

"Hey mister, you wanna have a sleep? Maybe the radio's annoying you. Me, I like music when I'm working. Tell you what, buddy, I'll turn the back speakers off, and you just relax. It's a long way to Camelford."

The driver turned a rotary control on the dashboard cutting the back speakers out.

They drove through the outskirts of Montreal and onto the long, sloping ramp leading to the expressway. The cab accelerated to 70 mph, and sped smoothly along the upper road, cars and lorries criss-crossing on the intersections below.

"How you feeling now, mister?" the cabby asked, glancing in his rear view mirror.

Walsh was slumped forward, his face a few inches from the driver's neck, lost in the shadows of the car. His hands writhed across his stomach in agony.

"You okay? You want me to turn the radio off altogether? Maybe

we'll stop for a minute, grab a breath of fresh air, if you like . . ." the cabby twisted round, his voice shocked into silence by what he saw in Walsh's face.

The actor was ashen white and his hands were clutching the back of the front seat. His eyes had completely clouded over with a milky film and it was impossible to see the dark pupils.

As Walsh stared blindly ahead, his body suddenly jolted and dark green foam, flecked with white spittle, bubbled from the corners of his mouth.

The cabby began to pull over to the emergency lane, but it was too late. Walsh grabbed the man by the shoulders, and twisting him round, bit him on the cheek, A chunk of flesh tore loose as the driver jerked his face away from Walsh's locked jaws.

Screaming with pain, the cabby tried to control the car, but Walsh pounced again. He drooled and slobbered, the blood pouring from the other man's face into his mouth. The driver screamed and took his hands off the wheel.

The cab slewed across the lanes, missing another car by inches. Hitting a low concrete wall at the edge of the expressway, it rose tail first into the air and cartwheeled onto the wide tarmac road below, landing on its roof.

The driver of the twenty-ton furniture van had no chance to take evasive action. As he slammed on his brakes he felt his heavy steel bumper crunch into the side of the cab, and heard the screaming of metal as he pushed the buckled car a few hundred yards along the road. The smashed cab twisted away from the lorry into the centre lane and burst into flames.

Grabbing a fire extinguisher, the lorry driver ran to the blaze. He managed to douse the worst of the flames and desperately tore open the doors.

The cabby was beyond help. His face was bleeding, and the driving wheel had been pushed through his chest, almost touching the back of his seat.

The haulier pulled out the man in the back. His head dangled like a limp rag, blood pouring from the back of his neck. He laid the man on the ground thinking he vaguely recognized him. As Walsh touched the tarmac, his head fell back and his eyes opened. The lorry driver recoiled with horror. They were not the eyes of a human being . . .

FIVE

Rose shivered in the clinic's warm reception hall. She was hunched low behind the empty desk, a phone in her hand dialling Hart's Montreal number. Her night gown dripped with water and under her left arm a pink patch stained the cotton.

She heard the phone ringing at the other end and prayed Hart would answer this time. Glancing down at the hand holding the phone she noticed caked blood beneath the fingernails. She moaned.

"Oh, God, what's happening? What have they done to me?"

Hart had fallen asleep at the table. He was slumped forward, his head resting on his arms, when he heard the ringing. At first he thought he was dreaming, the sound apparently coming from miles away. Since the accident he had not slept well, and after the bike had been brought back he had worked to the limit every night, often sleeping wherever he happened to be working.

Bits of engine lay scattered about the table and an oil-stained Norton Owner's Manual was open in front of Hart.

As he opened his eyes he was not sure where he was. Then he realized he had fallen asleep in the kitchen. The bell sounded loud in his ears, the shrill ringing going right through his head.

Still half-asleep, he lunged at the phone, nearly knocking it off the table.

"Yeah? Who is it? Whadya want?"

"It's Rose, Hart. Rose."

"Rose?" He was stunned into silence for a few seconds. "It can't be . . . they said . . . Dr. Keloid . . ." he stuttered.

"Hart, oh, Hart," Rose sobbed down the line.

"Rose? What's wrong. For God's sake, Rose, tell me."

"I don't know. It's awful. A nightmare."

"What's a nightmare? Where's Dr. Keloid? How are you feeling?"

"Terrible. You've got to come and help me. I need you, Hart. Come and take me away from here."

"Slow down, darling. I can't make out what you're saying. Have you just woken up?" he asked, looking at his watch. "It's four-o'clock in the morning, Rose. There's probably no one around. Go and ask the night nurse to help you. She'll get Keloid. You're going to be okay. Do you understand, Rose? You're frightened, that's all, honey."

“I’m not going to be okay. I know that. Can you hear me Hart?”

“Yes, love. I’ve got you now. Tell me what happened.”

Rose started sobbing again. “Oh Hart, just come and get me as quickly as you can. Please. I’ve got to get out of here,” she pleaded.

“Of course I’ll help you. I’ll be over there first thing in the morning. Don’t panic, don’t worry. The bike’s a write-off, so I’ll get a lift somehow. Whatever’s frightened you can be taken care of tomorrow. At least you’re awake now. I was so scared, Rose. I thought you’d never come out of that coma. Are you listening, Rose? Everything’s going to be fine. Rose? Are you still there?”

Rose did not answer. She was looking at Nurse Rita, who glared down at her, not believing what she saw.

“Hart, I’ve got to go,” she said quietly into the phone. “Please do what I asked.”

“Rose? What the hell’s going on out there? This is driving me mad.”

“See you, Hart,” Rose said and hung up.

Hart stared at the burring phone in his hand as if it were a strange growth which had suddenly developed.

“What the fuck are they doing to her? I knew she should have gone to a normal hospital. These fucking maniacs,” he muttered as he looked for his notebook. “Now, what’s the number of that bloody place?” he said as he thumbed through the pages.

“Shit! I haven’t got it.”

He found Murray Cypher’s name and number scrawled across a page in blue felt-tip pen.

The last thing Murray had said to him when he dropped Hart off with his bike was, “If you need anything, kid, just give me a call. If I can help, you know I’m just at the end of the phone. Okay?”

Hart dialled the number. To his surprise it was answered almost immediately.

“Hullo? Who’s that? Do you know what time it is? What do you think you’re doing calling me at this hour? This is a decent home. I could . . .” he paused. “Oh it’s you Hart. Why didn’t you say? What’s the trouble?”

“It’s Rose, Murray. She just called me.”

“Jesus! You phone me at four in the morning to tell me your girl friend called you. Are you nuts? What do you want *me* to do about it? Send a bunch of flowers?”

“Murray, you don’t understand . . .”

“Too damn right, I don’t . . .”

“Murray, I’m sorry to trouble you, believe me. But I’m going out of

my skull. What's Rose doing up at four in the morning? Why didn't Keloid call me, like he said he would if Rose showed any sign of consciousness?"

"I don't know. Maybe the kid woke up, felt lonely and went for a walk. Probably wanted to talk to you, that's all. Have you got the number of the clinic?"

"I've lost it. I thought I'd phone you first to see if you'd heard anything. I'll get the number from directory. But what'll I do?"

"Look, Hart," Cypher said wearily. "I'm sitting here with the baby who's about to chew the telephone wire in two. Here's the number of the clinic, give them a ring, and I'll get back to you in five minutes when I've settled the little monster down in his cot. Right?" He gave Hart the clinic's number.

"Thanks, Murray. Thanks a lot," Hart said quietly.

"Forget it. I'll call you back in five minutes," Cypher responded, putting the phone down.

"Now, my little terror," he said smiling at the baby. "Daddy is going to tuck you in beddy-byes. Who's a champion then?" He lifted the baby in the air, swinging it over his head. "Now I'll tell you a story about three bears and a little girl called Goldilocks," he said as he carried the baby upstairs to its room.

The baby did not know what he was talking about. And Cypher knew the baby did not know what he was talking about. But it made no difference. To Cypher, the baby's gurglings and attentive eyes made up for all the hassles of life that he faced every day. Cypher didn't mind getting up in the middle of the night to comfort the child. In fact, he insisted on it. And Cecile, his wife, did not argue.

Cypher tucked the baby in its cot, and went downstairs to make some coffee. He found a half-smoked cigar in an ashtray and stuck it in his mouth. He paced up and down the kitchen waiting for the coffee to percolate. In his blue silk dressing gown, his white pyjamas and cigar sticking out of his mouth, he looked like a demented millionaire waiting for some news from the Stock Exchange.

When the phone rang he jumped.

"Who is it now?" he snapped. "Oh, its you again, Hart. Well, what did they say at the clinic. Everything okay?"

"No," Hart replied. "All I got was a damned tape recorder asking me to phone later. I left a message for Keloid."

"You mean no one was up?"

"That's exactly what I mean."

"Now, this *is* weird. If your girlfriend is making calls in the middle of the night, then someone should know about it. Tell you what I'll

do," Murray said firmly. "I'll call Dan Keloid on his private number and put him in the picture. He can't have any idea that one of his patients is strolling round making calls. Then I'll pick you up at your place in an hour. Are you still where I took you and the bike? You are? Great. We'll drive to the clinic together. We should be there around mid-day if the traffic's good. How's that grab you?"

"That's . . . that's terrific, Murray. Thanks again."

"Okay. I'll phone if there's any problems."

The light on the percolator went out, indicating that the coffee was ready. Murray poured himself a cup, keeping it black.

It was going to be a long day.

Fred Atkins was wakened by something rough, soft and wet passing across his cheek. Opening his eye he found himself lying on the floor of his bathroom. He had no memory of how he had ended up there. Through his one eye he made out his dog, Scrap, standing over him, whimpering. The dog had been licking its master to try and revive him.

Fred's head pounded with pain and his limbs were stiff and cold. Supporting himself on the edge of the bath he staggered to his feet. He saw his bloodied face in the mirror, but felt no emotion as he looked at the reflection.

Turning on a tap in the wash-basin, he let it run until the basin was half-full. He grabbed a filthy rag from the floor and dipped it in the water. Wiping his face clean, he then rubbed most of the blood from his hands. Rummaging around the wall cabinet, he pulled out a pair of cracked sunglasses, the type with thick frames which hid his eyes from the side.

His head thumped, and his body ached. He was ravenous and an overpowering urge to eat came over him. He went through to the kitchen, swaying as he walked. He opened the fridge, but there was nothing in it except a few cans of beer and a bottle of sour milk. A loaf of half-eaten bread lay on a table, but Fred swept it aside angrily. Something inside told him that this was not the food he needed.

Drooling at the mouth, he stumbled to his pick-up truck parked in the yard. Scrap obediently followed.

The morning was cold and grey and the dawn light mingled with the dullness of a typical overcast Canadian winter's day. A low mist hung over the fields, it would not shift until the morning was almost over.

Driving like a man demented, Fred screeched off the farm's dirt track onto the main road. He drove for a few miles before he saw a

huge, gaudy notice advertising a Colonel Sanders Fried Chicken Palace a few hundred yards up the road. The Palace was a large converted caravan run by a young couple who kept it spotless.

The truck squealed to a halt beside a large diesel lorry, the only other vehicle in the parking lot. Inside the warm café a trucker sat at the counter, his heavy tartan jacket open, revealing the name of his company on blue overalls.

A pretty young blonde girl, her face pale with lack of sleep and long working hours, stood behind the counter idly wiping it down.

"Well, if you want to make it," she was saying to the trucker, "you got to put in the work. We hope to get up to the city soon and maybe . . ." her voice trailed off as she looked at the farmer stumbling across the café.

"Yes sir? Can I help you?"

"One bucket of your best for me and my dog there. And make it quick!"

The girl looked annoyed. "Of course sir, and do you want . . . oh!" she stopped as she noticed a tear of blood running down Fred's cheek from under the lens of his crooked, cracked sunglasses.

"Do you know you're bleeding, mister?" she asked. "Want a plaster?"

Fred didn't answer, wiping the blood with his finger. Another drop formed immediately.

"It's nothing," he said. "Cut myself shaving."

"On your eyeball, buddy?" the trucker queried. "Must have been one hell of a rough night."

"Yeah, sure," Fred sighed impatiently. "Musta been a fight or something. Can't remember too good."

The girl turned away and walked into the kitchen where her husband was busy frying a large portion of chicken.

"Here's the first one for Dave," he said, taking it out of the fat and putting it in a cardboard bucket.

The girl scooped a spoonful of coleslaw into a small paper bag and dumped it in, snapping a plastic lid on top.

"There's a weird guy out there, Chuck. I don't like the look of him."

"Does he want to buy anything?"

"Yes, a bucket of the best."

"Good," the young man said. "As long as he's paying I don't care if he's green and has parked his flying saucer on the roof," he laughed, dumping a breast of chicken into a vat of boiling fat. He was nothing if not ambitious, which was one of the reasons the girl had married

him.

“I’ll take this out to Dave,” she said, carrying the bucket out to the counter.

The trucker did not have time to reach out and lift the container from the counter before the old farmer pounced forward and snatched the food away, tearing the lid off and flinging it to the floor.

Raising the bucket to his chin, he began scooping handfuls of chicken, skin and all, into his mouth, drips of fat dropping to the floor. He flung the coleslaw across the room and it burst against a large picture window.

“Hey, mister, I think that’s mine,” the trucker said. “Yours is just coming. Right Angie?” he looked at the girl, who nodded dumbly.

“I don’t think you read me right, buddy,” the man went on. “I said you’re eating my chow. Now hand over and no hard feelings. I know what it’s like after a night on the hooch. But that’s no excuse for this sort of behavior.”

The trucker’s words did not register with Fred Atkins. He was fighting a wave of nausea that had gripped him. As soon as he had swallowed the chicken, he felt the churning in his stomach begin. He shook uncontrollably.

“I gotta eat . . . I gotta eat . . . must have food,” he said, leaning forward, parts of chicken and fried potatoes spilling out of the container.

“That’s it, buddy. Drunk or not drunk, no one messes with my food,” the trucker said, moving forward towards Fred.

The old man stood still, letting the bucket slip between his fingers and fall to the floor. The hammering inside his head had become almost unbearable and his body felt as if it was breaking up. A strong taste filled his mind and mouth, and a demoniacal desire to eat flesh, raw flesh, with blood, totally possessed him.

The trucker stopped in front of Fred.

“I don’t hit anyone with glasses,” he said. “Take them off. I want to see what you really look like,” he added, leaning forward and lifting the sunglasses off Fred’s face.

“Jesus Christ! What in the name of God is that?”

The old man’s right eye was a bruised red mass of sores, swollen at the top and open at the centre. The remains of an eyeball lay on the bony socket, blood from a crusted sore above seeping over it.

His other eye had clouded over with a light grey film that covered it from the whites to the pupil. Fred shook his head violently from side to side and, crouching like an animal, snarled at the trucker. From the corners of his mouth, bits of half-chewed chicken spewed out,

followed by a stream of dark green foam.

The trucker took a step back.

“You’d better get to a hospital, mister, you’re in . . .”

Before he could finish, the farmer leapt forward, grasped the man’s jacket and tried to bite his face. The green slime spattered across the trucker’s overcoat.

“You crazy bastard,” he said, moving to the side, smashing his fist across Fred’s face. The farmer reeled backwards and then lunged again. The trucker dodged to one side and caught Fred by his jacket lapels, and swung him over the counter.

“What’s going on out here?” Chuck said, coming out of the kitchen with a pan of boiling fat.

The farmer lifted himself on all fours and saw, through a white haze, the leg of the young girl a few feet away from him. He darted forward and sank his teeth into her calf.

The girl screamed hysterically, pulling back with all her strength. Fred fell over onto his face, a chunk of the girl’s flesh mixing with the green mud-like liquid in his mouth.

The girl slumped to the floor, blood pouring from her leg. Green foam dribbled and bubbled around the open wound.

Without hesitation, Chuck poured the boiling fat over the farmer’s face. The old man put his hand up in a futile attempt to protect himself while the trucker grabbed the farmer’s jacket and beat his head against the floor. Chuck, his face twisted with anger and distrust, kicked the old man in the ribs.

By the time they had finished, Fred Atkins was nothing but a bloody pulp.

Scrap, the dog, sat patiently outside with a piece of stolen chicken, waiting for his master to take him back to the farm.

As the dawn chorus was beginning, Dr. Keloid stood in a small, well-equipped laboratory attached to his private rooms. He peered down the twin lenses of an electronic microscope at a sample of Rose’s blood.

There was a quiet knock at the door, startling him out of his concentration.

“Yes?” he said, glancing at his watch and wondering who would be wanting him at 4.30 a.m.

Nurse Rita entered the lab, closing the door quietly behind her.

“Oh, it’s you Rita,” Keloid said, smiling, “I thought it was a patient with a complaint.”

Rita did not smile. A worried expression on her face made Keloid drop the small talk.

"What's the matter, Rita?"

"I think you'd better come with me," she said. "Immediately."

"In my dressing gown and pyjamas? Is it that urgent?"

"Yes, Dr. Keloid. It's Rose . . ."

"Rose!" he interrupted. "What an odd coincidence. I've been examining her blood to try and figure out how she can do without saline and glucose drips. I think . . ."

"Dr. Keloid, this is urgent," Rita emphasized.

"Okay, okay. I'm coming. Now tell me what's happened tonight."

Rita explained how she had found Rose in the hall, wet and shivering, using the telephone.

"But this is the strange part, Dr. Keloid," she went on as they walked along the deserted corridors. "When we got back to her room and I'd changed her gown, she refused to let me put her back on drips. She cowered away every time I came near her with an IV needle. She's terrified of them, doctor. And she kept on crying when I told her that she needed them for food. She's mumbling about getting her own food. I don't know what to do."

"I'll talk to her, Rita," Keloid said. "It's probably something very simple," he added, not believing it was that easy.

"Oh, and doctor, one other thing."

"Yes?"

"The gown that Rose was wearing when I found her had a large blood stain under the left armpit."

"The *left* armpit, you say?"

Rita nodded.

Keloid quickened his step, a sudden fear tightening his abdomen.

When they reached Rose's room, Keloid opened the door and turned to the nurse.

"I think you'd better leave me alone with her, Rita," he whispered. "She may be frightened of you, thinking we're here to put the needles back in. If you wait at your desk I'll come and see you later."

Rita agreed and went back along the corridor.

Rose dangled her feet off the side of the bed, her back to the door as Keloid spoke with Rita. She heard the door close and Keloid coming over to her.

"Hi, Rose. I'm Dr. Keloid. Dan Keloid. I'd like to have a little chat, if that's okay by you."

Rose stared silently down at the floor.

"You caused us some worry, you know," Keloid continued. "That was some smash you were in. Your boyfriend Hart is fine, by the way. I gather you spoke to him tonight. Is that right Rose? Rose, are you listening to me?"

Rose nodded.

"Good," Keloid said, sitting on the bed beside her.

"Now get this straight, Rose," he said softly but firmly. "I'm here to help you. It was me who operated on you."

Rose lifted her head for the first time and looked straight at Keloid. Tears streamed down her cheeks, and she clasped her hands tightly together between her legs. A dull throbbing ache had started in her stomach. But this time, she told herself, she was determined to fight it.

The doctor would understand, surely. After all, he had made her the way she was. He'd just admitted it. Without thinking of it, the image of Judy Glasberg's face as she lay under the water crossed Rose's mind. She began weeping more profusely.

"Now, now, now, Rose," Keloid tried to soothe her, laying his hand on her shoulder.

She threw her arms around him, and sobbed loudly on his shoulders. Keloid hugged her gently and patted her back as he would a baby.

"Come on, sweetheart, come on," he said stroking the back of her head with his other hand. "Tell me what's troubling you. Whatever it is I'll try and fix it for you."

Pulling himself away from her, he laid Rose on the bed. She showed no resistance, and lay staring ahead.

"We won't talk about anything except how you're feeling? Is that a deal?"

Rose nodded.

"That's better. The first thing I'm going to do is check out some of these skin grafts for you. You're a very lucky girl, you know. One of the first people in the world to undergo a major internal graft surgery so successfully. You'll be famous—at least in the medical text-books," he joked.

Rose looked sharply at him. Keloid was searching for a probe in the bedside cabinet, and did not notice the flash of hatred cross her face.

"Got it," he said, lifting a wooden spatula in the air. "I'm just going to poke you gently with this. Tell me if it hurts anywhere."

Rose stared at him, like a spiteful child that's been caught stealing and then beaten.

"Could you slip out of your gown and raise your left arm above your head?"

Rose shook her head forcefully, raising her hands in front of her face.

Keloid frowned.

"What's bothering you, Rose? I just want to make a routine examination. Are you in pain? Where does it hurt? How can I help you if I don't know what's wrong with you?" His voice had an edge of anger. "Tell me, please."

"I'm hideous, doctor," she said, not taking her hands away from her face. "I've gone crazy and turned into a monster."

Keloid laughed. "Don't be silly, Rose. You're a perfectly normal, rather beautiful young girl. You've been through a trying time, but now you've everything to live for."

"No, doctor, no. You don't understand," the tone of her voice one of disappointment. Keloid obviously had no idea what she was going through. "I'm not the person I was when you brought me here. It's as if I'm two people. I watch myself doing things but can't stop them. Things that are evil, that are abominable. My mind is bursting with the horror of it all. Oh God, oh God," she cried.

Keloid watched her for a few moments.

"You've done nothing, Rose. You haven't been anywhere except here. You've been dreaming a lot, I know, I could tell from your eyes."

Rose desperately wanted to believe him, but the wet gown in the corner with the ugly stain on it told her the truth. And she had tried to make him understand. God knows she had tried.

"Now look, let's stop playing about and get down to business," Keloid snapped. "We'll look at this arm for a start," he said forcing Rose's hands down from her face. He lifted her left arm out of the gown, and pushed her hand above her head.

He stared in disbelief at her armpit. The swelling above the lymph nodes had developed into a fleshy, round lump with a knurled opening at the end. Keloid pressed it gently with his fingers. The bump was spongy to the touch, and he could feel no hard lumps that would indicate an external carcenoma. But, he reminded himself, that was no guide as there were hundreds of types of cancer from soft muscle to hard bone cancers.

"Does that hurt?" he asked, pressing the lump at its base.

"No, there's no pain *there.*"

Keloid ignored the implications of Rose's answer and leaned forward to study the strange swelling closer. The ridged end of the protuberance seemed to be made up of sphincter muscles similar to those in the large intestine, or bowel. Holding the wooden spatula carefully, he pushed down on the soft opening.

His eyes widened in amazement when he looked into the fleshy pouch. Buried deep in Rose's muscle fibres an angry red tip, like the end of a thumb, glistened in the light. It seemed to be pulsating, moving up and down like a tiny heart. White triangular bars, attached to the edges of the growth, lay in a flat star formation.

Keloid was stunned. He removed the spatula and the opening quickly drew together, like the neck of a string-purse.

Rose looked at him, a smile of superiority on her face.

"Mmm, you've got some kind of external tissue growth down there, Rose," he said, trying to hide the confusion in his voice. "To be honest, I've not seen anything quite like it. But it'll only take a simple operation to whip it out, and then we can study it properly."

"No! Don't touch it!" Rose spat.

"Don't be silly, child," Keloid said. "You won't feel a thing. We'll put you under anaesthetic. You do want out of here, don't you?" He peered down at the lump again. "Fascinating. Could be a type of intestinal tissue which somehow developed just under the skin," he muttered, half to himself. "The neutral field tissue, adapting itself to the small intestine, would try to find a way to get food that you could digest into your body," he looked up at Rose.

"I was hoping that you would have a brand new set of intestines, but the neutral graft obviously had different ideas," he smiled. "But this is crazy! It's probably a local malfunction in the cells around your lymph nodes. We'll soon know."

"No! No! You're not going to touch it! You'll kill me if you do," she said in an intense, throaty voice.

Keloid was mystified. He had no inkling of what she was talking about. As far as he knew, she had only been conscious for a few hours.

But a horrible suspicion crept into his mind.

"How long have you been awake, Rose? Can you remember?"

"A couple of days, I think."

Keloid breathed in sharply. "A couple of days," he echoed, fighting to keep himself calm. "Don't you feel weak and tired?"

"No, I feel strong," she chuckled. "I feel very strong."

"Rita tells me that you won't let her put you back on intravenous drip. Why not? If you want your strength back, you'll have to . . ." his voice trailed off as he realized the idiocy of his statement. She had only just told him that she was feeling strong.

"Quite, doctor," she smiled mischievously. "You see, I don't need your so-called nutrient drips. They make me feel sick."

"Impossible. They're your only source of food."

"How do *you* know? They're not, not since that man . . ."

“Man?” Keloid interrupted. “What man? And what’s he got to do with your food intake?”

Rose raised herself on the bed, looked Keloid straight in the eyes, leaned forward and put her right hand behind Keloid’s head.

“I’ll show you,” she whispered, drawing his head slowly towards the growth under her arm.

Keloid was about a foot away from the lump when he saw it begin to open and the crimson tip emerge. The barbs, which during his examination had been lying flat, were now erect and formed a jagged edge along the tube that was gradually slipping out of its pulpy sheath.

Keloid hesitated, fascinated by the movement of the growth. And in the brief moment of his pause, Rose twisted both hands in Keloid’s hair, pushed his head down towards her left breast, and straining, arched her back.

Keloid felt a sharp pain under his ear, and what seemed like a bore of tensile steel forced its way through his neck, almost to his epiglottis. He tried to scream, but the pressure of the live tube against the inside of his throat produced only a low gurgle which, as the blood began to be sucked from his body, ended with the speed of a light switch being thrown.

Keloid collapsed over Rose who began to rock him back and forth, smiling softly as she felt the doctor’s blood flow through her body.

SIX

When Keloid woke, he found himself beside the sleeping body of Rose. It had only been about ten minutes since he had passed out, but he could not remember how he came to be lying on the bed.

Rose's left arm was resting above her head, and Keloid stared at the rust-colored lump under her armpit. He vaguely recalled examining it before . . . but for what? He shook his head, trying to recall. But it was no good. His mind was blank.

He staggered from the bed, his face white. He felt a warm, sticky trickle at the side of his neck and glancing in the mirror, saw blood oozing from a round, neat, cut. Tearing a paper towel from a dispenser, he wiped the blood away, not noticing the blobs of green fluid that clung around the edges of the wound.

He walked along the corridor towards Nurse Rita, swaying slightly.

"Are you all right, doctor?" she asked, watching him support himself on the walls.

"Sure, sure," Keloid slurred. "Sleepy. Very sleepy. Must have a rest."

As he stumbled past her towards his private rooms, Rita shook her head in sympathy.

"He works far too hard," she thought.

Keloid threw the door of his bedroom open. By the light of a small bedside lamp he saw Roxanne lying awake.

"There you are Dan," she said. "Murray's just called. Says Rose has been wandering around the clinic making phone calls. Did you know anything about it?"

"I've just seen her. She's fine," he replied, slumping heavily on his bed. "She's going to be okay."

"Are you feeling ill, Dan? You look terrible," she said, concerned at the way Keloid seemed to be staring ahead, a glazed look in his eyes.

"Yes, thanks. I'm just tired. Very tired. I must sleep," he said, lying back on the bed.

"You'd better get some rest. We've got that eleven o'clock operation on Kim Marks, the facelift job."

"Mmmm. I'll be there."

The telephone buzzed beside his bed. He heard it, but his arms seemed so heavy that it was impossible for him to lift the handpiece off the hook.

Roxanne leaned across and answered.

"What? Dead? I don't believe it. How did it happen?" Roxanne responded, listening in silence for a few minutes. "Yes, he's here, but he's just about asleep. I don't want to disturb him. Okay, we'll phone back tomorrow."

"Dan? Dan? Are you awake?"

Keloid forced his leaden eyelids apart. "Yes, what is it?"

"Lloyd Walsh's been killed. That was the General Hospital. He let himself out sometime during the night, telling another patient he was feeling fine. He took a cab which crashed on the expressway. The cabby was also killed. They're going to carry out an autopsy."

"An autopsy?" Keloid asked, struggling to clear his head of the fogginess that was filling it. "Why an autopsy? Was the cabby drunk or something?"

"No. It's Walsh. They are saying something about his eyes being weird. It doesn't make sense to me, Dan. What do you think's going on?"

Keloid sighed. "I'll think about it tomorrow, Roxanne. I've got to get some sleep."

"Okay, I'm sorry."

During Dan Keloid's last moment of lucidity before he slipped into the blackness of sleep, two things happened. First, he became aware of a tingling warmth in his veins, not particularly unpleasant, in many ways like the feeling he had when he took a slug of whisky on a cold day. The fiery heat spread through his body and his brain felt as if it was covered with a warm, wet cloth.

Secondly, with startling clarity, he realized what had happened to Rose, and the significance of the lump and pulsating probe under her arm.

Roxanne had been right in her fears. The neutral skin graft had produced mutant cells which ran riot through her body. The freak cells, the creators of cancer, had come to rest at an injury she had received in the accident.

Keloid saw the whole ghastly process as if on a screen. The malignant intestinal and stomach cells developing into the tube, held together by connective tissue. The malformed organ taking on the characteristics of a stomach cancer—a hard, scaly shape. The white barbs at the end of the newly-formed intestinal sucker had probably been the first to materialize, being a mixture of phagocytic cells, or pus, and the monster cells. As the tube developed, the lymph nodes would be over-powered in their struggle to produce enough lymphocytes, the cells that make antibodies, the same antibodies that

contribute to the rejection of new tissue or organs in the body.

But the lymphocytes would not give up. They would form a sort of enclosure, the enclosure that Keloid had seen as sphincter muscles. The cancerous tube beneath it would adapt itself to the basic formation of the intestinal cells, and as such would need feeding to carry out its normal function.

Only in this case it was not normal and the ‘food’ it needed would have to be readily digestible. Like blood.

Rose, in short, had become a grotesque specimen of a vampire.

Keloid realized all this as he lay on the verge of sleep. It was a secret that would never be known by anyone else. For when he woke, he would be in no condition to pass the information on . . .

“Highway slush,” Murray Cypher moaned as he sipped coffee from a polystyrene cup. “I don’t know what it is, but they just don’t know how to make coffee at these stopovers.”

Hart nodded.

“I mean look at these lousy cups,” Cypher went on. He was never in the best of moods in the morning, especially at eight-thirty after three hours driving. “I reckon that’s what gives the coffee the funny taste. Probably full of disintegrating chemicals from the cup. I hate to think what our insides are like. Probably being eaten away. Hey! Are you listening, Hart?”

Hart was looking down at the plastic-topped table, idly making patterns with his finger. He looked up.

“Sure, Murray. Sorry, I was thinking of Rose.”

“Aw, c’mon Hart. I already told you. There’s nothing to worry about. The fact that the kid’s up and making telephone calls shows that she’s one hell of a lot better than when she was carried into the clinic. Right?”

Hart nodded slowly. “Yeah. You’re right. But she sounded in trouble.” He looked up. “How long have you known Keloid, Murray?”

“Now don’t start getting funny ideas like that,” Cypher said angrily. “Dan Keloid’s the best plastic surgeon in this country. I’ve know him for about five years, since he was sewing bodies together in the accident unit of the Central Hospital. A friend of mine needed a nose job done and persuaded Keloid to do it privately. You know, Hart, that Dan was so dedicated to medicine that in those days, he never treated privately, because he said it was everyone’s right to be fit and healthy!”

“He might not be wrong.” Hart muttered.

Murray ignored the remark. “Anyway, I was so impressed by what

he did for my buddy, that I put the proposition to him that he ought to start the clinic. Not just any old clinic, I said, but a clinic that would be the best in the country, both in medical and comfort terms. A clinic that would attract the top people . . .”

“. . . And charge the top prices,” Hart interjected.

“Yeah. Hey! Whadya mean?” Cypher said. “You want the best, pal, then you gotta pay the best, Right?”

Hart shrugged. There was no point in arguing with a man like Murray.

“And in five years the Keloid Clinic has established itself as the leading plastic surgery unit in Canada. Not bad, eh?” Murray grinned.

“Terrific,” Hart smiled.

“You sarcastic sonofabitch,” Murray laughed as he playfully cuffed Hart’s ear. “I’m proud of the clinic. It’s my baby. I helped create the place. Now drink your plastic coffee up. We’ll grab a couple of Cokes, and get on our way. You’ll see if I’m wrong about the clinic and Dan. You’ll kick yourself for worrying about nothing. I could have been breakfasting in bed and having a top-level financial discussion with Jeffrey at this moment.”

“Who’s Jeffrey?” Hart asked.

“My son. Eighteen months next week. I’ll tell you about him as we go along.”

For the next hour and a half, Hart listened to Murray spout about his baby. By the time they were within an hour of the clinic, Hart knew what Jeffrey ate for breakfast, lunch and dinner, how many teeth the baby had, what weight he was; the color of his hair, height, who Jeffrey looked like, what words Jeffrey was saying, and the future that Murray had planned for the child. Hart had never seen a grown man enthuse about a kid the way Murray did. It was as if Cypher had had the first baby boy to be born in the world.

But in a strange way, although Hart and Cypher came from opposite ends of the social spectrum, Hart liked Cypher. At least he was honest, open and friendly. And it was obvious that Cypher was fond of Hart in a genuine, helpful manner.

So Hart pretended to take an interest in the development and mannerisms of young Jeffrey Cypher.

“You want to have a bit of shut-eye?” Cypher asked eventually. “You look pooped to me.”

“Thanks, Murray. I could do with a rest,” Hart said, lowering the seat.

“Are you comfortable in that gear?” Cypher said, nodding at Hart’s leather trousers and jacket.

“Yeah, it’s warm.”

Cypher shook his head. He could never understand the way modern kids dressed.

He turned on the radio and hummed to the music as they drove along.

About half-an-hour from the clinic, they passed a Kentucky Fried Chicken Palace. Outside stood four police cars and a large crowd of people. How is it you always get crowds round an accident, Murray thought, even in the middle of the country?

Cypher shook Hart.

“Hey, wake up!” he said excitedly. “That’s the place they been talking about on the radio.”

“Huh?”

“The place where some old guy went crazy. Didn’t you hear it?”

“I’ve been trying to sleep, Murray.”

“Oh, yeah. Well this old guy comes in early this morning and asks for some chicken and goes berserk in an argument about who was to be served first, him or this trucker.”

“So? What’s so special about that?” Hart asked not at all interested, beginning to think about Rose once more.

“Well, this crazy old coot goes completely loco and bites the counter girl on the leg. The news said that he was overpowered by the trucker and the girl’s husband. But by the time the police got there the old guy was dead—‘of unknown causes’, they said. Heh-heh, I bet I could tell them what caused his death. He was probably thumped to fuck by the other two. The police said it was rabies, and shot the old man’s dog.”

Hart nodded drowsily, not really listening.

“Anyway,” Cypher said, “We’re right here. That’s the chicken shop over there,” he added, waving his hand to the left. “Want to stop off for a bite? Eh?” he said, laughing.

“I’m not hungry, thanks,” Hart replied, not seeing the joke.

Cypher raised his eyes to the roof. “Forget it,” he said, and tuned the radio into an easy-listening music programme.

Hart clasped his hands tightly between his legs. He was worried about Rose and did not know why. He needed to get some answers from Keloid and the thought obsessed him.

Worrying about an old man who went mad would not help ease his mind. As far as Hart was concerned a lunatic who went round biting people had nothing to do with Rose, about whom he was becoming increasingly uneasy.

"I don't think you'd better do this one, Dan," Roxanne said quietly, as they stood in the surgical washup room of the clinic. "You don't look well at all. Are you sure you want to go through with it? It's a pretty simple facelift. Louise and I could handle it with no trouble."

"I'll be fine. There's nothing wrong with me. Stop bothering me," Keloid said, pulling on a pair of surgical gloves and turning to an orderly who was preparing gowns.

"What's that plaster on your neck, Dan? Cut yourself shaving?"

"I'll be fine," he repeated, swaying slightly as he held his arms in front of him, waiting for the gown to be put on.

"I don't think so," Roxanne said, worried at his appearance.

Keloid looked at her. His eyes were hooded and his stomach felt like a whirlpool.

"Stop arguing, woman," he shouted. The orderly looked embarrassed and turned away, busying himself with some dishes.

Roxanne was shocked. In all the years she'd known him, he'd never raised his voice like that, and he'd never argued in front of the staff.

"Dan . . . Dan . . . what's wrong?" she said, her voice cracking with emotion.

"Nothing. Nothing. I'm fine," he retorted, putting a mask over his mouth, and turning away from his wife to avoid further discussion.

She did not see the spasm of pain pass across his face as steel claws gripped his insides.

Inside the operating theatre William Karl had already hitched the patient up to the tubes of oxygen and nitrous oxide, ensured the gases were passing smoothly through a tank of Halothane, and was now monitoring the unconscious man's breathing. Louise, the theatre sister, was waiting at the side of the operating table while an orderly hung around waiting for orders.

Keloid stood beside the patient for a few seconds and glared down at him. Roxanne looked across at Karl, a frown on her face. Karl raised his eyebrows as he registered Keloid's unusual behavior.

"Scalpel, nurse," Keloid said.

The nurse passed across a scalpel and Keloid firmly cut a line along the patients cheek, next to the ear. A thin trickle of blood began to seep along the incision and the orderly wiped it away.

Working steadily, Keloid rolled the skin back and pulled it a few millimetres towards the ear with both hands. He asked Roxanne to start the stitching.

Roxanne had been watching Keloid closely, looking for signs of fatigue, but to her surprise he had not wavered once during the operation.

But as he took over from her and sewed the skin closely together, with the minimum of space between stitches, he swayed forward. Roxanne looked quickly up at his face. Beads of sweat glistened on his brow and cheeks above the mask, which was soaking with what appeared to be spittle seeping from Keloid's mouth.

His hand began to shake and the team stared anxiously at the doctor as they heard his breathing become labored.

"Would you like me to continue and complete the stitching, Dr. Keloid?" asked Roxanne, noticing that his hand had wavered before inserting the needle.

"I'll finish it myself, thank you Doctor Rushton," he replied. Roxanne always insisted on being called by her professional and maiden name in front of the staff, a rule she also applied to Dan Keloid.

"Are you *sure* you don't want me to take over?" she asked. "You could do with a rest."

Keloid ignored her. "I need . . . I need something to cut with, Dr. Rushton, if you please."

"You want the scissors, *now,* Dr. Keloid?" Roxanne queried, surprised at the request. Keloid was only half-way through the stitching, and the scissors would not be needed for at least another five minutes.

"Yes, Dr. Rushton," Keloid said, slurring his words. "I said now. Please do not argue."

The others glanced at Roxanne, who lowered her eyes. Hesitating, she picked up a pair of serrated surgical scissors and passed them across the patient to Keloid.

Keloid's hand was already stretched out waiting for them, but instead of allowing Roxanne to place the scissors on his palm as he would normally do, he grabbed her wrist.

"What are you doing? Dan . . . !" she yelled as he snatched the scissors out of her hand, almost breaking her wrist with his grip. "Let me go and I'll finish . . . My God!" she screamed as she saw Keloid's face, leering close to her entrapped hand.

His eyes were covered in a greyish-white film, like two circles of pus. She stared in horror at him, and tried to pull away.

With a vice-like grip Keloid held her hand and began to cut her index finger below the top joint. Blood spurted through Roxanne's glove as Keloid sawed at her bone, turning the scissors round the finger, trying to snap it off.

Roxanne tried to scream again, but her throat was clogged with fear. Flinging the scissors away, Keloid, still holding Roxanne's wrist,

ripped off his mask and moved round the operating table beside her.

From his mouth, thick green fluid dribbled down his chin. He twisted Roxanne's wrist back, forcing her to the floor. She fell on her knees, blood from her finger running back along the arm held above her head by Keloid.

With a snarl which spat green bile across Roxanne's face, Keloid bent down and began sucking the blood from his wife's finger, biting through the half-severed bone.

Roxanne at last managed to voice her terror and the scream reverberated in the operating theatre, forcing the thunder-struck witnesses into action.

Louise, who had been standing with a tray of sterilized instruments in her hands, dropped the tray. She turned and ran for the door, knocking over tables and trolleys full of equipment.

The orderly stood in a corner, shaking his head in disbelief, too scared to move. It was Karl, the anaesthetist, who tried to stop the carnage.

Leaving the patient, who slept through the whole scene, Karl held Keloid by the shoulders and tried to pull him off Roxanne.

"For God's sake, Dan!" he yelled. "What's got into you? Have you gone insane? Stop it, Dan! In the name of God, will you stop this lunacy!"

Karl managed to hoist Keloid to his feet. But with a violent surge of strength, the doctor swung his arm back across Karl's chest, knocking the anaesthetist against the table. Karl fell against the unconscious patient, dislodging his inhaler and knocking him to the floor.

Keloid turned like a hungry animal and, seeing the patient lying a few feet away from him, dived at the man, sinking his teeth into the partially closed incision that he had made only a short time before.

Karl had now regained his balance and he tugged desperately at the doctor. Keloid paused in his grisly slobbering and faced Karl, blood and skin dangling from his mouth.

"Dan, you've got to . . ." the words were cut off as Keloid lunged at Karl's throat, the only flesh visible under the surgeon's mask, and snapped the anaesthetist's larynx between his teeth.

Karl backed off, blood pouring down the front of his gown, his mouth working noiselessly, his eyes above the mask bulging with horror. He took three steps before fainting.

Louise, standing at the door, saw Karl fall, and rushed out, "I'm calling the police! Help! Help! Get the police!"

The orderly, cowering in the corner, tried to edge towards the door but fear had taken all strength from his legs. He watched as Keloid

blindly stumbled across to Roxanne who lay moaning and writhing on the blood-slicked floor. Horrified, he saw Keloid sink to his knees and, ripping off Roxanne's mask, slowly begin to eat her cheek.

Then, mercifully, the young assistant passed out.

A squad car arrived within minutes of Louise's call. The nurse stood trembling at the main door, being comforted by Rita.

Four black-uniformed policemen ran to the entrance.

"What's all this about murder? Where is the guy who's killin' everyone, then?"

"In the operating theatre," Rita said. "It's . . . it's Dr. Keloid," she added, shaking her head, not believing what she was saying.

The cops ran along the corridor and burst into the theatre. They shrank back when they saw the chaos before them.

"Jesus, fucking Christ!" one of them said, looking round at the bodies strewn all over the room. "What maniac did this?"

Rita pushed her way past.

"That's him. That's Dr. Keloid," she said, pointing at Keloid lying across Roxanne's body.

The state of the theatre, and the quiet moans of the people she had known registered in her mind, and she began crying.

"Get her out of here," the sergeant said, "that's all we need."

One of the men led Rita from the room.

"Right! Get that bastard," the sergeant snapped. "But watch him, he's dangerous."

Keloid had not moved since the police entered. A young constable stepped forward, and tried to lift him by the shoulder.

With a throaty growl, Keloid turned on the man and sank his teeth into his hand.

"Get him!" the sergeant roared, leaping forward and hitting Keloid over the back of the neck with a revolver.

The doctor slumped forward.

"Call the paddy wagon. And fast. And get a doctor along here at once. At least there should be one in this fucking place," the sergeant said. "And Johnson, get outside with that hand. I'll call the doc and make sure he's got some of these rabies shots they were pumping into everyone down at the chicken café. Looks like we got the same thing here."

The policemen left, leaving the sergeant standing over Keloid with his gun aimed at the doctor's head. He was going to take no chances if the madman so much as twitched.

He breathed with relief when he heard the whine of two other police cars outside.

Rose was sitting in the front lounge when Louise, half-screaming and half-crying, had run past shouting something about Dr. Keloid going mad and killing everyone. She frowned, wondering what was happening.

She turned to the young trainee nurse who had been instructed to stay with her and make sure she didn't pull the needles attached to a mobile intravenous cart out of her arm.

"I would help that woman if I were you," she said to the girl. "I think she's in trouble."

The nurse looked confused, caught between her orders to stay with Rose and what she felt was her duty. Jumping up, she ran after Louise, following a stream of other nurses and patients who were trailing after the distraught nurse.

Rose was left alone with a woman whose head was completely swathed in bandages except for slits over her eyes, nose and mouth.

"I wonder what all the excitement's about?" Rose asked the woman.

"I don't know," the woman replied in a muffled tone. "And I don't care. It doesn't sound good to me. I'm going to lock myself in my room until it's all over." She stood up and walked out.

Smiling, Rose carefully pulled the IV needles out of her arm as she listened to the shouting and screaming in the background.

People rushed past her in the corridors as she walked along looking at the name plates on the doors. She stopped before one marked Judy Glasberg and, glancing to the right and left, pushed the door open and slipped quickly inside.

She looked round the room, and winced when she saw photographs of Judy 'before' and 'after' her previous operation. Next to the door stood a large wardrobe with sliding doors and Rose pulled one of them open.

She ran her hand along the clothes hanging inside, and took out a red nylon jacket, a light blue woollen jumper and a pair of dark blue slacks. Stripping off her gown, she dressed quickly, and then chose a pair of brown leather shoes from a jumbled selection at the foot of the wardrobe.

She opened the door and peered along the corridor. It was deserted. She ran through the clinic, heading for the back, away from the commotion coming from the reception hall.

She soon found the lower floor fire escape and pushing the iron lever down, let herself out. She ran through the grounds, and out of

breath, reached the main road.

Leaning against a tree, Rose smiled. She was free. Free to go to Hart, and free to head for Montreal . . .

SEVEN

"Almost there, kid," Cypher smiled at Hart. "Then you'll be reunited with your loved one. I feel like a cupid, bringing two lost lovers together."

"I appreciate it, Murray. I really do," Hart said.

"Well, when you get to my age, it's nice to do something romantic in a while. But don't go on, or you'll get me crying. I can just imagine Dan's face when he sees me turning up with tears streaming down my cheeks!"

Hart smiled.

"I hope she's all right, Murray," he said. "I got a feeling in the pit of my stomach."

"Aw, you're not starting that again. We've been through it a hundred times already. The kid gets up in the middle of the . . ." his words froze as he turned the last bend into the clinic's driveway.

"What the hell's going on?" he said. "The place is crawling with cops."

Hart stared at the clinic. "My God, you're right. Jesus! It's Rose. I know it is. Something's happened to her! What have they done with her? Oh, no," he said, running his hand through his hair, "We're too late."

"Calm down, Hart, will you? They wouldn't need three cruisers for just one girl. Something else is going on. That's for sure."

Cypher pulled in beside the three police cars, and Hart jumped out before they had fully stopped. Cypher followed him to the front entrance, noticing a paddy wagon with two policemen standing guard over it, rifles in their hands.

"What the hell's been going on?" he muttered as they entered the clinic, which looked as if a bomb had hit it.

"Hey! You! Where do you think you're going?" a policeman bellowed at them.

Before Cypher had a chance to answer, Louise, who had been sitting talking to a man taking notes, rushed up to him.

"Thank God you're here, Mr. Cypher," she said, "It's been awful. Absolutely awful."

"What are you talking about, Louise? Where's Dr. Keloid?"

"Who are you, mister?" the cop asked.

“This is Murray Cypher, officer,” Louise said. “He’s one of the owners of the clinic.”

“Now tell me what happened, Louise.” Cypher insisted.

“It’s Dr. Keloid, Mr. Cypher. He went mad in the middle of an operation. Completely berserk. He tried to kill Dr. Rushton and Dr. Karl. They’ve taken them away,” she choked, and began sobbing.

Cypher sank down on a seat.

“Dan? Crazy? I don’t believe it. I just don’t believe it. Dan?” he echoed. “A killer? Impossible.”

Hart grabbed Louise by the elbow.

“Have you seen Rose? Is she all right? Do you know where she is?”

Louise seemed confused.

“Rose? Rose . . . oh, yes. She’s around somewhere, I think. She had nothing to do with this.”

The man with the notebook approached them.

“Look, miss, I’m sorry to butt in, but I got to file a report. So far I got the bit when . . .” he looked down at his pad, “. . . you said you were in the middle of a normal facelift job, and this Dr. Keloid fellow went crazy. Is that right?”

“That’s right,” Louise agreed. “The operation was nearly over, we were stitching up, or rather Dr. Keloid was stitching up . . . oh, this is so terrible.”

Hart turned his back on them and wandered through the clinic in search of Rose.

He came across two women sitting in the lounge, one wearing a white pair of gloves.

“. . . sure they took her away,” the woman was telling the other patient. “I saw it myself. Never would have believed it. Especially in a place like this. She was bleeding all over the place and screaming at the top of her voice. Completely mad, I would say. Couldn’t understand a thing she said.”

“Excuse me,” Hart said, interrupting the flow of the woman’s description. She sounded as if she almost enjoyed telling the tale, which in fact she did.

Both women looked at Hart.

“I’m sorry to break in, but it’s about a patient here,” Hart continued. “Rose is her name. She’s my girlfriend and I want to see if she’s okay.”

“Rose? Rose?” the gossip said. “You don’t mean the girl who came here to have her nose fixed twice in a row, do you?”

Hart shook his head and walked away.

“I wonder if I can get some compensation from the insurance

company?” was the last thing he heard the woman ask her friend.

There was no sign of Rose as he searched the clinic. He found himself back at the front door where Cypher was still talking to the police inspector and Louise.

“Inspector, this is Hart Read,” Cypher said as Hart sat beside them. “We came here together. He’s worried about his girlfriend who’s a patient.”

The inspector nodded at Hart, and turned back to Cypher.

“So how long have you been Keloid’s business partner?”

“About five years.”

“And you’ve no idea why he would suddenly go crazy?”

“None. It’s incredible. I’m still trying to take it in. It’s too much to accept at once,” Murray said. He looked shaken and pale.

“I think you’d better come with me, Mr. Cypher,” the policeman said, walking across to the glass swing doors.

Murray looked at Louise who turned her head away.

“Go on, Mr. Cypher. I couldn’t stand it again. It’s horrible,” she said, her voice breaking and tears welling in her eyes.

Cypher and Hart followed the inspector.

Outside, they headed for the paddy wagon. Passing a Quebec Bureau of Health ambulance van, the inspector stopped.

“Just a minute, please,” he said, opening the rear door of the van.

Inside, a young policeman lay on one of the side benches, his jacket and shirt open to the waist. A doctor knelt beside him.

“How you feeling now, Johnson?”

The policeman grimaced. “Ask the doc. He’s about to finish me off.”

The doctor turned round, a large hypodermic syringe with a thick needle nearly five inches long in his hand.

“If you’ll excuse me, gentlemen, I’d like to get on . . .”

“Sure, doc,” said the inspector, starting to close the door, “I’m sorry.”

Before the door shut, they saw the doctor place the syringe over the policeman’s stomach.

“These rabies shots are killers,” said the inspector. “Reckon I’d take my chances on getting sick instead.”

“Rabies?” Cypher asked, incredulously. “Is that what you think . . .”

“It’s what we know, mister. Same thing happened down the road this morning in a chicken palace.”

“Yes, I heard on the radio,” Cypher said.

“Well, a couple of my men have been bitten. One when they

arrived, and the other when we were hauling the bastard to the paddy wagon. I'm taking no chances."

"Bitten? By what?"

"By that," the inspector pointed at the wire mesh windows at the back of the wagon.

Cypher stepped forward. The two policemen on guard stepped aside to allow him to look through. He shrank back as Keloid pressed his face against the wire, green slime drooling from his blood-smeared mouth. His whitened eyes rolled wildly and he snarled as he tried to force his teeth through the mesh, cutting his lip as he did so.

"My God, oh my God," Cypher groaned.

"Can you confirm the identity of this man as Dr. Daniel Keloid?" the inspector asked.

Cypher nodded.

"It *was* Dan," he said. "God alone knows what it is now. How could this have happened?"

"That's what we're trying to find out, buddy," the policeman answered. "Let's get back inside and see what they've uncovered."

Hart and Cypher followed the inspector into the clinic. A police photographer was snapping everything in sight.

"Anything new?" the police chief asked two officers who stood watching the pictures being taken.

They shook their heads.

"Look, I'm trying to get to my girl friend, Rose," Hart said. "She might be in trouble. I spoke to her last night and she sounded upset, but I can't find her anywhere. You haven't seen her around have you? She's blonde."

The policemen looked at each other.

"We got a young girl downstairs. Wanna take a look at her?"

Hart was excited.

"Yes, yes. Of course. Did she ask for Hart? That's me. Where is she? Is her name Rose?" he poured out the words, heady with anticipation.

"We don't know what her name is. We didn't ask. Follow us," one of the officers said. "Okay if we take this guy down for an ID, chief?"

The inspector nodded, and Hart went with them towards a door marked BASEMENT. Going down some wooden steps he found himself in large white-washed room with old oak beams across the ceiling. The clinic had once been a farmhouse, and this was the one area that Cypher had not radically altered.

Against the walls, steel-framed storage racks contained piles of blankets, sheets, pillows and hundreds of cardboard boxes, each

labelled neatly with their contents.

A bank of four floor-to-wall freezers stood at the far end of the basement. Two were marked FOOD and the others MEDICAL SUPPLIES.

Hart stood at the foot of the stairs and watched one of the policemen walk towards the furthest food freezer. He felt his heart pound as his hopes turned into apprehension. The policeman swung open the massive door of the freezer.

“C’mere. You’re not going to see anything from there,” he said.

Reluctantly, Hart moved forward. He looked to the side, not wanting to see what was in the freezer, deep down expecting the worst.

“C’mon kid. We gotta know. Is that Rose?”

Hart forced himself to look. Inside, at the back of the icebox taking up the whole lower section, was a frozen body, hunched up and staring, its eyes frozen in bulging terror. Ice hung from the eyelashes, and the mouth was twisted in a silent scream.

They had found Judy Glasberg.

Hart gasped. He was horrified, but at the same time relieved.

“No, that’s not Rose,” he almost sobbed.

“Okay, let’s go,” the cop said, closing the door.

Hart felt numbed as he followed them back upstairs. The events of the last twelve hours had shattered him. Rose’s call, the drive, the insanity at the clinic and now that body in the freezer.

At least he knew Rose was alive. Every instinct told him so. The police would have found her if anything had happened.

But if she wasn’t in the clinic where, in the name of God, was she?

The big diesel truck squealed to a stop on the gravel shoulder of the road. The driver looked in his wing mirror at the young girl in a red jacket and blue slacks skipping along towards him . . . He smiled. He was beginning to get lonely on his long drive from Detroit to Montreal and could do with some company. Especially female company.

As the girl peered up at the cab, the driver was doubly pleased. She didn’t look like the average type of chick who thumbed her way around the roads.

“Montreal?” she shouted.

“Yup. Climb in,” he said, leaning across the cabin and releasing the passenger door lock. If only his wife could see him now . . .

“Hi. I’m Rose,” she said after the driver had swung out on the road. “Great day for hitching.”

“I’m Eddie,” the trucker told her. “Eddie Barnes. Been trying long?”

“No. Just started, as a matter of fact. What are you carrying?”

“Car components. Seems nowadays they need more spares than they put together in the car in the first place.”

Rose laughed.

“Where you coming from?” the trucker asked.

“Eh . . . Camelford,” Rose replied, remembering a sign she had seen outside the clinic.

“Had a bit of trouble down there, didn’t they. Heard it on the radio. Something to do with rabies.”

Rose stiffened imperceptibly.

“I don’t know,” she said. “Never came across it. Did you say you had a radio?”

“Right behind you,” the driver said, nodding at a small transistor hanging on a strap from a plastic hook. “Switch it on, if you like.”

Rose tuned the radio to a Country and Western programme and, slipping her shoes off, put her bare feet on the dash-board, tapping in time to Ronnie Milsap singing ‘Night Things’.

For the first time in weeks, she felt happy. She was glad to be out on the road, away from the clinic and its morbid atmosphere. She wanted to laugh out loud, she felt so joyful, thrilled at being free, healthy and heading for Hart.

Soon the clinic would be a bad dream, something she could put behind her. But at the thought of the clinic, she remembered Judy Glasberg, Lloyd Walsh, the doctor, and the sight of Fred Atkins kneeling in the barn, one hand over his eye. She felt confused.

It was as she had tried to tell Dr. Keloid. She had become two people. Sitting in the truck, she was lucid, rational and *normal.* But when the pain came over her and she felt the need for blood, her mind seemed to snap onto a different wavelength. Part of her watched herself behaving like an animal. Yes, that was it, she thought as the lorry roared along, she became an animal. A wild animal that savagely ate its victims.

But that was not possible, she told herself. She must be imagining it. She *was* sitting in the cabin of a truck full of car parts, making for Montreal where everything would fit into place. Now that she was away from the clinic she would prove that she was normal. She shuddered as she thought of herself actually *eating* blood.

“Don’t say much, do you Rose?” the trucker laughed.

“I’m sorry, Eddie. I was thinking.”

“Hungry? I’ve got a steak on a bun here. The real thing. Want some?”

“Mmmmm . . . sounds great. I’d love a bite,” she replied. Now was her chance to show herself that she could eat like any other person.

Eddie passed across a paper bag which she tore open. The bun was wrapped in tinfoil.

“It’s still warm,” she said. “How come?”

“I keep it on the engine tunnel,” the trucker said, patting the large metal casing in between the seats.

Rose peeled the tinfoil back and bit into the bun. She chewed slowly and forced herself to swallow it. It was the first solid food she’d eaten since the day of the crash.

“You’re right,” she said. “It *is* good. Fabulous.”

She held the bun in her hand, humming to Carl Perkins playing on the radio, looking at the road ahead.

The driver looked across and smiled.

“Are you going to hold that all day, or can a poor starving trucker grab a bit?”

“Oh, I’m sorry. Here,” she said, reaching across with the bun.

As the driver was about to take it, Rose clutched her stomach with one hand and almost choked.

“Christ! Are you all right?” asked Eddie, pulling the truck into the side.

Rose shook her head and, as the lorry stopped, opened the door, jumped down, falling to her knees on the ground.

Bent double, she was violently sick before she had a chance to stand upright.

The driver ran round from the other side of the truck.

“Last time I buy chow at that greasy spoon, I tell you that. Musta been the meat. Come on, sweetheart, there’s a girl. Get it all out. You’ll feel better after it. That’s right. Get rid of it all.”

Rose straightened up, wiping her mouth with the sleeve of her jacket. She took it off and tried to walk back to the truck, but almost collapsed.

“Now, now, honey,” Eddie said, picking the jacket off the ground. “Just put your arms round me, and I’ll lift you back in. What you need is some coffee or soup. There’s a place not too far ahead. We’ll pick some up there. Okay?”

Rose nodded weakly and put her arms round the trucker’s neck. He hoisted her up and carried her to the cab. Rose clung to him tightly, an awful aching in her body. She closed her eyes, and buried her head in his shoulder as the tears began to fall.

Inside the cabin Eddie laid her down on the passenger seat, closing

the door behind him.

"You just rest there, and I'll climb across here and get us on our way . . . Hey! Don't worry," he said as Rose reached up and put both hands behind his neck. He noticed the tears on her cheeks.

"Don't cry, sweetie. What's worrying you? Huh? You'll feel better after some black coffee."

Rose gave the trucker a forlorn smile. Then she folded him tightly in her embrace.

A Chrysler estate pulled off the road. Laughing, Rose ran to meet it.

"Where you going?" a pleasant, plump-looking lady asked. She was alone in the car.

"Montreal," Rose answered.

"Your lucky day," the woman said. "Same place as me. Hop in."

Rose settled in the front seat beside the woman, excited that the last stage of her journey back was beginning.

"Thanks. That's wonderful," she said. "I was beginning to think I'd never get home. Do you mind if I doze for a while. It's been a hard morning."

"Of course not, my dear. I'll wake you when we're near Montreal."

Rose closed her eyes and drifted into a dreamless sleep.

"Okay, buddy. Shift your ass," the nasal voice sawed through Eddie Barnes' semi-consciousness. He opened his eyes and saw a traffic cop looking up at him from the other side of the cabin.

"Something wrong with you?" the policeman asked.

The trucker shook his head.

"No, no. I must have dozed off for a while. That's it, I guess. Just pulled over to have a nap. Coming up from Detroit, you know. It's a long drive."

"Yeah, sure. You guys are going to get in trouble some day, if you don't watch out. Too many of you popping pills to keep yourselves going day and night. I think you're all nuts," the cop said. "But next time, pal, choose a better spot for your snooze. This road's kind of narrow. You could cause an accident."

"Will do, officer. I'm sorry. Must have got really drowsy. Can't remember too well how it happened."

"Okay. Don't let it happen again. Now get on your way, and have a good day."

"Thanks. Thanks a lot," Barnes nodded gratefully as he started the

engine.

The policeman stood on the hard shoulder beside his car and watched the lorry roar off the slipstream and into the distance.

“Crazy bastards,” he muttered. “All for a few extra bucks. They’ll wind up in the mortuary.”

EIGHT

On the afternoon of the day that Dr. Keloid went mad, The Quebec Bureau of Health announced that an epidemic of rabies had broken out in the Camelford area. It appealed to people to stay away as quarantine orders had been applied to the clinic, the police station, the chicken carry-out, and Fred Atkins' farm. It further announced that Claude Lapointe, a high-ranking official of the Bureau, had been put in charge of the operation and it was expected the situation would soon be under control.

Lapointe listened to the Bureau's statement on a radio in the Camelford police station, smiling wryly. Soon under control, he thought. Why did the bureaucrats in government departments leave themselves open to abuse and ridicule by making such statements? They had not even identified the strain of rabies as yet, although laboratories in Toronto, Montreal, Quebec and New York were working day and night on the samples.

Claude Lapointe had been with the Bureau for over twenty years. A qualified medical technician, his dedication and long hours soon marked him as a high flyer, a man with ambition. Critical, but not openly disapproving of his superiors. Lapointe often felt that if given the chance he could run the Bureau more efficiently and make a greater impact on the government and public.

The rabies epidemic could be his chance. Inwardly, he was delighted that he had been asked to head the investigation and quarantine programme. Press, television and radio reporters would soon be converging on him. It was a once in a lifetime opportunity, and Claude Lapointe was not going to let it slip.

He sat back in the temporary office that the police had rigged up for him at the station. He reckoned about a week would see the spread of the disease contained, and another week for clean-up operations. Two weeks to carve another niche in his career. Two weeks. Not that long, he thought. But long enough.

Rarely had a man so underestimated the task that lay ahead of him . . .

The first television crew arrived an hour after the Bureau's announcement. They set up their cameras and lights outside the station and asked Lapointe to stand on the steps with a folder in his

hands. “To make it look as if you’re coming out with some important news,” they told him. Lapointe did not argue. A clapperboard snapped and the interviewer, holding a long microphone, approached Lapointe.

“And this is Claude Lapointe of the Quebec Bureau of Health in front of quarantined police station 52 in Camelford,” said the newsman.

He paused and Lapointe looked confused, not sure of what to do next. Out of camera, the interviewer gave him the thumbs-up sign, before moving forward.

“Mr. Lapointe, would you say this rabies epidemic is as dangerous as previous outbreaks we’ve known?”

“Well, yes. It’s a new strain and not one we’re familiar with. Until we can identify it, or least find an antidote, I would say that it is potentially the worst of this century. It’s not as if we’re dealing with swine fever or Hong Kong flu,” Lapointe went on, warming to his task, “we’ve had several deaths in this small area already. And as I say, we’ve no idea what we’re up against.”

“Do you mean that we’re *not* talking about an outbreak of rabies as we know it?”

“No, I didn’t say that. What I’m trying to get across is that we have on our hands a new type. There are certain symptoms involved which we, and even the world health community, are not familiar with.”

“What are these symptoms, Mr. Lapointe? Could you outline them for the benefit of our viewers?”

“Of course,” he nodded. “After the virus has been passed onto the victim, through the normal method of biting, this disease incubates and develops to maturity in about six to eight hours. Which is very unusual. Normal rabies takes longer, much longer, to surface. And with this new strain, the victims begin to sweat, shake and foam at the mouth, which is similar to animal rabies. That’s what we know happens *outside*. So far we haven’t been able to ask a victim what’s going on inside their body or what they feel after being bitten.

“The rare aspect of the disease is that, in every case we know of, the sufferer becomes extremely violent and seems to feel a need to bite someone. They go completely crazy, this insane phase being followed by a coma and, to date, death. It’s a very strange form of disease, and I certainly haven’t come across anything quite like it.”

“Thank you, Mr. Lapointe. That puts us in the picture as far as the *type* of disease we’re talking about. But what about advice? Can you give the viewers any?”

“Well, the disease spreads through the saliva of the victim. The saliva is highly contagious and if introduced to the blood stream by being dribbled into open cuts and wounds it causes immediate

infection."

"So?"

Lapointe shrugged.

"So . . . don't let anybody bite you," was all he could think of saying. "If someone does, get to a doctor at once for rabies shots. Vaccination centres are already being set up here and will be soon spreading out towards Montreal."

"What would happen if you can't contain the disease?"

"I don't like to think about that. If it's not kept localized and away from the large centres of population, well . . . I wouldn't like to say what could happen."

Cold panic suddenly gripped Lapointe. He was beginning to comprehend exactly what he was saying.

"Mr. Lapointe, one final point. I heard you mention the Black Plague of London just before we went on the air. Is that what you mean by what could possibly happen?"

Lapointe, realizing for the first time that millions of people could watch the interview, forgot his own ambitions and decided to play the whole thing down.

"We scientists like to get dramatic about these things from time to time," he laughed. "It's more interesting than the usual backroom stuff and paper-work we're normally saddled with. This is . . . this is a real challenge. And now if you'll excuse me," he said, walking past the reporter.

The interviewer turned to face the camera.

"This is Keith Draper of CBC News outside Camelford police station, which could well go down in the history books as being the source of another Black Plague, handing you back to the studio."

Lapointe, standing at the side of the camera, swore under his breath, a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach. Damned reporters!

In Montreal the night was cold and a thin frost covered the ground. On the outskirts of the city, huge arc lamps beamed down on a truck depot, filled with lorries being unloaded. Fork lifts hummed around the square, carrying wooden crates from the giant diesels to the smaller town transporters.

A group of truckers, their faces pinched with cold, stood in a circle drinking steaming cups of coffee or clapping their gloved hands together.

A dispatcher, a small wiry man of about fifty wearing a hunter's hat and carrying a clip board, pushed his way through the men.

"Anybody here seen Smooth Eddie? He's got the lead truck and he's pissed off somewhere, the sonofabitch."

"Have you tried the local knocking shop?" someone asked. The men laughed. Eddie Barnes' liking for women was well known.

"Listen," the dispatcher said, not smiling. "If we don't move his fucking truck now, then you'll all be behind schedule. And don't come running to me for overtime pay."

"I think I saw him climb into the box of his truck about half an hour ago," a loader said. "He didn't look too good to me. He was kind of white and holding his stomach."

"Probably too many pills and too much fucking booze," another driver said.

"Will you shaddup!" the dispatcher said angrily. "I want to get this circus moving. Now, whadya mean he didn't look good. Smooth Eddie's never had a day's fucking illness in his life."

"I'm telling you what I saw. He looked sick."

"Aw, get out of the way, I'll find him myself," he said, pushing his way towards the lead truck. "What the fuck we running here, anyway? A nursery?"

He pulled open the steel doors at the back of Eddie's truck and looked into the darkened container.

"Eddie? You in there? We got to get this rig moving. Eddie, where the fuck are you?" He peered into the shadowy gloom. There was no sign of the trucker.

He turned to the ceiling-high piles of crates behind the lorry. Spaces had been left between the mountains of boxes to allow the fork lifts access.

The dispatcher checked a couple of lanes and then began to walk back to the centre of the compound, muttering vile oaths.

A scrabbling noise came from behind him and, turning, he saw Eddie hurtling out of the shadows towards him, a steel hook used for pulling crates in his hand.

"What the . . ." was all the dispatcher had time to utter before the hook sliced through his cheek. Eddie crashed into him, knocking the man on the ground. In an instant, the trucker flung himself on top of the screaming man, and slobbered at the bleeding wound, sucking the blood noisily.

About half-a-dozen loader and drivers came running at the yells of the dispatcher. They froze for a moment when they saw what was happening.

Eddie looked up at the men gathering round him. His mouth poured green, bubbly saliva and his eyes were off-white discs.

The truckers acted as one, pouncing on Eddie trying to pull him away from the dispatcher. The crazed driver thrashed about wildly, biting in every direction. He managed to bite a few men in the arms or legs, before the sheer weight of punching, kicking and hammering loaders forced him to the ground. When they finally stood back, Eddie's broken body lay perfectly still.

Five men lay around moaning, clutching wounds the rabid trucker had inflicted on them. Someone called the police and ambulance services, and the men were rushed to a hospital in central Montreal.

This occurred nearly three hundred miles from Camelford. As Claude Lapointe had said, he had no idea what would happen if the disease struck at the heavily populated centres . . .

Hart was bored. He was cooped up in Camelford police station having been refused permission to leave for at least forty-eight hours until the authorities had verified he was clear of any hint of infection.

He sat, hugging his knees against his chest, in a corner of a room which had been set up for witnesses. Murray Cypher was at the opposite end, waving his hands about in front of a white-haired policeman who was having difficulty in keeping pace with the businessman on an old typewriter.

". . . and so we just arrived, officer. Saw all these cop cars and knew something was going on," Cypher gesticulated. "That's all I know. Don't ask *me* why. All I can say is that I've lost a good friend and damned good business."

The policeman grimaced, raising his eyebrows. These city slicks were all the same, he thought. All they think about is money.

"That'll be all for now," the cop said. "But don't go for any country walks. The air might kill you," he added sarcastically.

Cypher opened his mouth as if to say something, changed his mind, and walked back to Hart.

"What a bloody mess, kid," he said, rooting about in his pocket. He pulled out a half-smoked cigar—Cypher always seemed to have a constant supply of half-smoked cigars about him—and sat wearily beside Hart.

"Yeah," Hart sighed. "A real bloody mess. But I wish I knew where Rose was. It's driving me nuts."

"Have you tried phoning your pad in Montreal?"

"Dozens of times. No reply. Christ knows what she's up to, or where she's gone."

"What about friends? Has she got any in particular? If she didn't get you at home, the betting is that she would head for one of her

buddies."

"Naw, Murray," Hart shook his head. "We were pretty much loners. We stuck together a lot over the last two years. But wait a minute . . ." he paused. "Murray! You're a genius! Of course! Mindy Newman. Her old school chum and closest friend. Surely Rose would call her," he said, standing up and struggling in his pocket for change to feed the telephone box on the far wall.

Cypher watched him push his way through the people towards the call-box, shaking his head at the passion of youth. He'd called his wife earlier to tell her that he'd be away for a couple of days, but she only seemed concerned about what Cypher would want for dinner when he returned.

The room was full of clinic patients, doctors and nurses. Harrassed policemen tried to take down statements on a battery of ancient typewriters, and Cypher thought this must be what Hell was like, only a bit warmer. They were in a building attached to the main station, normally used for storing old files, and the only heating came from two portable paraffin stoves standing against a wall.

Hart stood listening to the ringing tone of Mindy's flat, one finger in his ear, trying to drown out the cacophony in the background.

"Hey? Mindy? Is that you," he shouted. "It's Hart. What? I can hardly hear you. Speak up, will you? That's better. Yeah, yeah, I'm fine. Just fine. Has Rose been in touch with you. She has? Say that again, I lost you."

"I said she called me," Mindy repeated at the other end, trying to balance a pan of hot fat in one hand. Hart had called as she was preparing her evening meal.

"That's great. Where is she now?"

"She's on her way over. What's that noise your end? You sound as if you're in the middle of a battle."

"Ah, it's just crazy over here. You wouldn't believe what's going on."

"Where are you? Can you come over and see Rose tonight?"

"No chance. I'm at the Camelford cop shop. Yeah, Camelford. It's a town not too far from the clinic Rose was in. Now listen, can you tell Rose when she gets to you that I'm going to be here for at least forty-eight hours. They got a big epidemic scare and are pulling everyone in from the clinic for observation. It's something to do with rabies, but they don't know what kind. Yeah, the whole clinic. So you've got to tell Rose to get along to a hospital for tests, just in case. I'll ask a doctor here if she's to go. And Mindy," he yelled above the noise around him. "Keep Rose there until I can get away from this madhouse. I'll come straight to your place. Sure Mindy. You take care

too. Seeya. Ciao."

He hung up and made his way back to Cypher.

"Why are you grinning like a cat who's found the cream?" Cypher asked.

"Better than that, old buddy," Hart smiled broadly. "I found Rose."

The police had thrown a cordon round the clinic. Those staying at the clinic were allowed to return after the forensic experts and medical teams had finished searching for any leads that could explain the sudden outbreak of rabies. They came up with nothing.

No one remembered seeing a dog about the place and, anyway, animals were forbidden within the vicinity of the clinic. No visitor was allowed to bring one in, even for a few hours. It had been one of Keloid's strictest rules.

"He didn't even like animals," Louise told one of the investigators.

Later that evening the police chief, Lapointe and the men who had been working on the case met in Keloid's office.

"You mean to say that you've got no idea how this happened?" the chief said irritably. He did not like unexplained mysteries, especially on this scale.

"We found no traces of any rabid animal in the clinic or its grounds," one of the medical team said.

"Perhaps the doctor had gone for a walk," Lapointe suggested, "and ran into the dog you shot down at the fried chicken place?"

"No, no," the inspector sighed. "We've checked as best we can Keloid's movements over the past twenty-four hours. He didn't take a step outside."

"Then I have no explanation," Lapointe said. "Unless . . ."

"Unless what?" the chief snapped, sitting forward in Keloid's chair, his hands on the desk.

"Unless a patient brought the disease in with him or her," Lapointe said.

The inspector slumped back in his seat.

"We thought of that as well. There were only four new admissions in the last forty-eight hours. And we've checked them all. They're clean. Nobody brought it in, that's for sure."

"There's another alternative," Lapointe said quietly.

The men looked at him expectantly.

"Go on," the chief said.

"Maybe this new type of rabies can lie dormant in a carrier and be passed on long after the initial infection," he explained slowly.

“Is that possible?” asked a man in a white coat with the letters QBH stitched on his collar.

Lapointe thought for a minute, the others staring in silence at him. He had to be careful, even with these men, about any wild theories he postulated at this point. Besides, he could not really see how such a hypothesis was feasible.

“Not really,” he said at last. “Unless you believe in science fiction.”

The men laughed nervously, and one of them put forward the idea that the disease could have been carried in some meat. The discussion flowed fast, one idea following after another.

Lapointe turned to the inspector, who was sitting listening to the arguments with a frown on his. face.

“What about that girl you found in the freezer? Any clues to how she got there?”

“Yeah, we think we got that one worked out at least,” the inspector said. “We reckon that she was the doctor’s first victim. The medics estimated her body had been in the fridge no longer than twelve hours, which would mean that she was dumped in the middle of last night sometime. That could have been the time Keloid started going crazy, but not so crazy that he didn’t know what he was doing. She’s got a strange wound in her side from which we took some samples. There was green stuff around the edge, and the lab tells me that it’s infected saliva. So it all ties in. Sound okay to you?”

Lapointe shrugged. Something about the story didn’t fit together. He was beginning to run over it, when the phone rang.

The inspector answered it.

“It’s for you,” handing the handpiece to Lapointe.

The official listened in silence to the caller for a few minutes.

“Thanks for letting me know,” he said quietly and put the phone down.

He leaned on the desk, his head drooping forward. Everyone in the room looked at him. Taking a deep breath, he looked up.

“Gentlemen,” he said almost indistinctly. “It’s hit Montreal.”

“Jesus,” the inspector said in a flat, low voice.

“Bet you’ve never been in prison before, Murray,” Hart joked as they sat that night inside an open cell at the police station.

“Been pretty close, mind you,” Cypher laughed.

The police station had been converted into an emergency observation post. The police had attempted to make Cypher and Hart’s cell more comfortable and a couple of easy chairs and a table with a

lamp stood in front of the bunk beds.

Hart sat on the side of one of the beds watching Cypher leaf through a pile of papers he had brought with him from the clinic.

Cypher kept shaking his head and tutting.

"I keep looking at this stuff and everywhere I see Dan Keloid's name. I still can't believe the creature we saw in the paddy wagon was actually Dan. It's so hard to believe. Forty, that's all he was, you know. A brilliant future ahead of him and then this had to happen. Cruel, that's what it is. Cruel."

"What you looking at, anyway?"

"Oh, some of Dan's papers. I'm trying to sort them out into some sort of order to give to Roxanne when she comes out of hospital. If she comes out, that is. The last time I phoned they said she was strapped down because she was getting violent and beginning to spit that green stuff from her mouth. They say it could be temporary, and won't know until tomorrow. She already bit one nurse on the hand, mind you."

Hart stretched his arms.

"I'm going stir crazy already and we've only been here a day. Anything in that pile of bumph worth reading? Or is it all medical gobblegook?"

"It's pretty exciting stuff once you get into it," Cypher said. "I've got some nice economic forecasts here if you fancy them. Oh, Jesus," he put his head in his hands. "To think what we could have done, Dan and me. Just think."

Hart did not know what to say. At times Cypher seemed more concerned with the loss of the business, at others the tragedy of losing a friend. Hart could not make it out.

He stared at Cypher, feeling helpless.

The sound of crashing glass and screams from the main office at the end of the cells startled them both. Jumping up, they ran into the aisle.

"Must be a fight," Cypher said.

"Yeah, I wonder . . ." Hart did not have time to finish as the metal door at the end of the corridor burst open and they saw the inspector of the station backing slowly towards them, his service revolver in his right hand.

"George! For God's sake, man, stay back," the inspector pleaded, talking to someone out of sight in the main office. "Can't you understand, George? Just do as I say. For Christ's sake, sit on the floor and put your hands on your head."

"What's going on?" Hart asked.

The inspector glanced quickly round.

“Get back in your cell and be ready to lock yourselves in. Don’t argue!” he said, looking towards the main office again. “Do as I say!”

Hart looked at Cypher, who shrugged and started back to the cell. Just as they reached it another policeman shambled through the door, his arms dangling by his sides.

The cop was sweating heavily and his breathing was wounded and broken. His eyes, white orbs in the centre of black circles of skin, stared rigidly ahead. Green foaming saliva spilled from his mouth as he advanced on the inspector, deaf to his pleas.

“Get out of the line of fire, Ted. We’re going to blast him from here with the scatterguns,” a voice yelled from the main office.

“Give me a count of three, Joe!” the inspector replied. “I’ll be out of the way by then.”

There was a pause and then the voice shouted “ONE.” The inspector drew level with the cell, and turned to check if the coast was clear.

Cypher was flat against the far wall, beads of sweat on his forehead. Hart stood at the door of the cell, horrified but fascinated at the same time.

“Gimme some room,” the inspector ordered. “I’m coming in quick.”

“TWO . . .” the voice shouted through.

The half-crazed policeman lunged towards the inspector, who neatly stepped back into the cell past Hart. The man immediately changed direction and flung himself at the door. He was half-way through when Hart, gripping the bars, put his foot in the man’s stomach and kicked him back into the aisle.

“THREE!” they heard, followed by the deafening, explosion of several shotguns going off at once.

The crazed officer was lifted several feet into the air by the force of the bullets punching through his body. He crashed into a stone wall at the end of the cell-row and slumped to the ground, his arms flailing and legs crumpled beneath him. He seemed to sit still for a moment, his back against the wall and his head at a bizarre angle. Then he slowly fell forward in a spreading pool of blood.

The men walked out of the cell and over to the body. Three policemen, rifles in their hands, cautiously came down the passage. The inspector, his revolver hanging loosely in his hand, stood over the corpse, shaking his head.

“That was Johnson,” he said to no one in particular. “He got bit up at that bloody medical goonshop this morning. And they gave him fucking rabies shots right away.” He turned to the three marksmen. “They didn’t do him any damn good, did they?” he asked angrily. “What a mess. What a fucking lousy mess.”

Hart and Cypher looked at each other blankly. Cypher, his shoulders slumped, eyes heavy, and gazing at the floor, turned and walked slowly back to the cell. Hart followed.

It had been a much longer day than either of them had imagined.

NINE

Mindy Newman was attractive. There was no doubt about that. Attractive in a bubbly, joyful, voluptuous way. At twenty-one, she had reached the age when she knew what she wanted. Or rather, as she constantly told boy-friends, she knew what she *didn't* want. And that was to settle down and raise a family. Mindy was too independent for that sort of life.

Not that she was a Women's libber. Far from it, in fact. She enjoyed being treated 'like a lady' and the longer it continued the happier she would be.

Mindy had left home at seventeen, 'to strike out on her own' she told her parents. And for four years she had done just that, living with no one, enjoying a varied but not too active social life. Although her parents were upset at first, when they saw she was not becoming a hippy, taking to drugs or getting pregnant by a gypsy, soon accepted her being away from home. In fact, Mindy claimed, they had become close friends.

She lived in a high-rise apartment block in downtown Montreal. By average standards her flat was small, but it was sufficient for Mindy's needs. It had one bedroom, a compact kitchen full of electronic gadgetry, a bathroom with a built-in shower ('a special extra', the estate agent had told her, 'not every apartment's got a shower unit') and a 'large' front room.

In short, there was everything in the place a single girl needed. It was also not too far from her office, as Mindy hated travelling during rush-hour. One stop on the tube took her straight to the IBM building where she worked selling office equipment.

After Hart's call she finished cooking the stew and french fries she was having for dinner, and carried the meal through to the lounge. She only glanced at the portable color television which was switched on at a low volume, noticing a special newscast about an outbreak of rabies in Camelford. I've heard that from the horse's mouth, she thought, and smiled at her own unconscious joke.

Idly flipping over the pages of the latest *Vogue,* she ate her meal. She was sipping a glass of cognac, alternating it with coffee, when there was a knock at the front door.

Standing in the hall, smiling happily, was Rose.

"Surprise, surprise," Rose said, "I'm back in the land of the living. Here, they're for you," and she held out a small bunch of flowers, the

kind sold at street corners.

Mindy grinned and took them.

"Come in, come in," she said.

Rose stepped forward, her arms open. They hugged each other passionately and when they eventually separated both were on the verge of tears.

When Rose was seated, Mindy poured her a brandy.

"Drink this. I'll bet they didn't have booze in that clinic," she said.

"Dead right they didn't," Rose laughed. "What a place! I'm glad to be out of there I can tell you."

"Talking of the clinic, before you tell me what's been happening to you and I tell you what's been happening to me, I'd better remind you that Hart phoned."

"Hart!" Rose said, a worried frown on her face. "Is he all right? I couldn't get a reply from the house. Where is he?"

"He's caught up in this epidemic scare down near the clinic. He's fine and says he's going to be coming here as soon as they let him away from the police station. Something to do with keeping everyone under observation. And he says you've got to go to hospital to find out if you've caught the bug."

Mindy thought Rose stiffened a little.

"I'm all right," she said, shaking her head. "You won't catch me going *near* a hospital after what I've been through at that clinic."

"What's been going on, then?" Mindy asked, surprised by the venom in Rose's voice.

"They treated me like a child," Rose answered. "I couldn't do anything I wanted, couldn't eat, and they had me on these awful drips which made me feel sick."

"Didn't you tell them that?"

"Yes, of course I did. But they wouldn't believe me. They forced them into me, the monsters. But I don't want to talk about it any more. What's with you, Mindy?"

"Oh, the usual," Mindy said. "You know me. Nothing steady on the romantic front, enjoying myself with different men. My job's going well, and if I pull off this sale tomorrow to some Arabs who are looking at our new idea in mini-computers, then I think I'm in line for promotion. That's why I've brought that home," she said, pointing at a heavy technical manual describing office equipment. "But I'll do that later. Tell me how it's going with Hart, first of all."

The girls talked late into the night, Rose refusing Mindy's numerous offers of food.

“I’m okay, Mindy,” she said, when her friend suggested a hamburger yet again. “I’m not at all hungry. Really I’m not.”

“Okay, okay, I won’t ask again,” Mindy smiled. “Look Rose, it’s nearly one-o’clock. Don’t think me rude, honey, but I’ve got this big day tomorrow with these Arabs. I’ve got to study that training manual, so’s I’ll know what I’m talking about.”

“Go ahead. I’ll watch the late night movie. Have you got an earplug so I won’t disturb you?”

Mindy found the plug, which was on a long lead, and put it into the television.

“Now put your feet up on this stool, and relax,” she said.

Rose watched the movie without much interest. Mindy sat in a corner of the room at a small desk, reading her manual and munching on a large ham sandwich.

Rose began to feel restless. She recognized the slight pounding sensation at the back of her neck. Soon it would turn into a thumping inside her skull and the ache would crawl over her body. Then the agonizing stomach pains would begin and Rose would be in no condition to stop herself.

She stood up, pulling the earpiece out. Mindy turned round, surprised.

“What are you doing, Rose?”

“I . . . I think I have to go for a walk. I need some fresh air. I’ve been cooped up for so long,” she said, reaching over and picking her jacket off a chair.

Mindy walked with Rose to the door.

“Rosie, I feel terrible. Here you are, just out of hospital, and I’m studying bloody training manuals about computers. I’m a lousy hostess and an awful friend. Come and have another drink.”

“No thanks. You’ve been great. Honestly. Absolutely great,” she took Mindy’s hand. “But I do want to get out into the real world, if you see what I mean. I want to walk down a street, see people and shops again. It’s been so long since I did that sort of thing.”

Mindy nodded.

“I know what you mean. Hey! I’ll come with you, How about that?”

“No, that’s not fair. You’ve got your work to do. I’ll be okay. I won’t be long, don’t worry.”

“Fine,” Mindy said, squeezing Rose’s hand. “But if you feel sick or dizzy then phone me. Right? Here’s a key in case I’m in bed.”

Rose laughed.

“You’re a great friend, Mindy,” she said, hugging her. “One of the

best. See you soon."

Rose took the lift down to the ground floor, and walked into the night. The air was bitingly cold, but Rose inhaled deeply, enjoying the smells of the city.

She headed for St. Catherine's Street, Montreal's night-life centre. She walked along it, looking for the most crowded part she could find. She wanted to be near people, be surrounded by them, feel their body heat.

Since the accident she had discovered that she was ultra-sensitive to human presence. All her senses had been heightened. She saw everything around her with the two-dimensional clarity of a photograph, and heard with the precision of a Ferrograph tape recorder. And when she touched anyone, she could almost feel the blood flowing through his or her veins.

In the crowded street it was as if she was standing neck-high in a river of tangible sensations which flowed round her, caressing her and driving her wild with desire for satisfaction.

Her skin tingled with energy and she moved along the busy pavement with firm, sure steps, her nostrils flared with excitement and a sparkle in her eyes.

A flashing neon sign caught Rose's attention. It was in the shape of an arrow pointing down to the entrance of an Eve Cinema. 'All Nite Showings of Uncensored Adult Movies' proclaimed a vivid orange poster outside the cinema. That night's offering was a double bill of soft Swedish Porn, *I Am An Au Pair* and *Steady and Ready*.

Rose looked at the publicity photographs of buxom nudes. Feeling impulsively mischievous, she dug into the pockets of Judy Glasberg's slacks, looking for some money. In the back pocket she discovered a crumpled five-dollar bill.

She looked into the foyer for a moment, wondering whether to go in. Then, her mind made up, she strode across to the cash desk.

The cashier looked surprised when Rose asked for a ticket. It was not often that a single girl wanted to see these sort of films.

She gave Rose two dollars fifty cents back along with the ticket. Beside the cash desk was a small sweet counter, and out of habit, Rose bought a box of popcorn.

Inside, she stood at the back waiting for her eyes to adjust to the light. Patrons were scattered around the cinema, which was about one-third full. A noise came from her left. A couple, who had obviously not come in to watch the movie, were writhing around, the man grunting as he tried to get some back-seat satisfaction. No one took any notice, preferring the celluloid sex on the screen.

Apart from the couple, Rose could not see any other women in the cinema. She walked down the centre passage, aware of hungry eyes following her. Picking a row of seats at random, she shuffled along to the middle and sat down to watch two particularly ugly girls on the screen trying to undress each other.

A few minutes after settling back and putting her feet up on the seat in front, she felt a hand brush against her hair. She didn't move.

" 'Scuse me," a male voice said behind her. "I didn't mean to touch you."

Rose turned round. A man in his mid-thirties with a round, smooth baby face stared back at her.

Rose sniffed, looking down her nose at him, and returned to watch the progress of the reluctant lesbians, who were still in the process of unbuttoning and unzipping.

A few moments later Rose felt the man's hot breath on her neck.

"Pardon me for existing, I'm sure," he whispered.

Rose twisted round once more. His face was inches from her, and she could see little black hairs sprouting from his nostrils.

"I thought you touched me on purpose," she said.

"Oh, no," the man said quickly, "It was a genuine accident. I was taking my coat off and it brushed up against you. That . . . that's it. Truly."

Rose shrugged.

"Fair enough," she said, smiling at him. "I'm sorry I was so touchy. But, you see, I enjoy coming to these movies. The only hassle is that men are always bothering me and I can't watch the movie in peace. Follow?"

The man nodded vigorously.

"Anyway," Rose went on. "I'm sorry. I guess I'm a little paranoid."

"Listen," the man said, after a moment's pause. "I've got an idea. Why don't I come and sit beside you and then everyone will think that we're together, and no one will pester you and you'll be able to watch the movie in peace."

Rose laughed. "What an original idea! And what do you want in return for giving me protection?"

"Nothing, nothing," he said, his lower lip trembling. "Except a couple of handfuls of popcorn, that is."

"Okay, come on."

He grabbed his coat and, trying not to rush, moved to the end of his row and then slid along and sat beside Rose. She unzipped her jacket and sat straight, stretching her legs out. She offered the man some

popcorn.

He took a handful and slowly munched it, watching the film.

“That’s nice popcorn,” he said, leaning across her for more.

His head rested on her shoulder as he reached for the box. To his surprise, she did not push him away. He kissed her gently on her neck. Still she did not complain.

Risking a slap on the face, he raised his hand and rested it on her right breast. Rose pushed herself lower in the seat.

“Mmmm . . .” she murmured.

The man could not believe his luck. She was enjoying it! Not even in his wildest dreams had he imagined anything like this happening to him. He thought these things only took place in the letter columns of girlie magazines, which he believed were made up anyway.

Rose was enjoying the sensation of the man’s hand on her breast, but not in the way he imagined. She felt the warmth of the man’s flesh through the thin jumper. A warmth that signalled the flow of blood.

The man was breathing heavily as he moved his hand across to her left breast, pressing down on the nipple, feeling it hard on the palm of his hand.

Rose, without taking her eyes off the screen, put her right hand behind the man’s neck and pulled him down to her breasts. She felt him gulp, and then put his lips firmly over her right nipple. His hot breath was like fire on her flesh.

She guided his hand over her left breast, pulling it round beneath her arm. Whimpering, she held his head tightly with both hands against her soft, bra-less body. She felt him jump and try to pull away, but her grip stopped that, and she squeezed his hand under her left armpit. The muffled moan that came from him was no louder than the groans she had heard from the couple in the back seat earlier on.

He sagged against her and lay still. Rose stroked his head, her cheeks flushed and a smile on her face.

After a few minutes she sat him upright, pushing his hands off her. As she lifted his left hand, she noticed blood streaming from a small hole in the palm.

Rose rushed out of the cinema from the side exit. She stumbled into an alley, breathless but satisfied. She leaned against a wall and watched the crowds go by on St. Catherine’s Street.

A look of animal fear was in her eyes as she gazed at the people flitting by the end of the alley. Normal people, she thought. People who could not understand her driving need, would *never* comprehend the pain that she suffered.

Creeping along the shadowy wall, she peered out into the street at

the multi-colored bright lights, the jostling crowds and the cars streaming by. It was as though she was watching a television screen, she felt so distant, so uninvolved.

The hope that by coming to Montreal she would start to act normally was shattered. By her action in the cinema, she knew she had negated her right to be part of the human race. Forever.

She ran into the busy street and didn't stop running until she was inside Mindy's apartment.

Rose was sleeping soundly in the spare bed when Mindy woke early next morning. Tip-toeing through to the kitchen Mindy prepared her breakfast. A believer in 'wholesome food' she started off with fresh orange juice, followed by muesli and then black coffee with bran buns. As she poured a second cup of coffee, she heard a sound from the bedroom and the bathroom door closing.

"Rose? Are you up? Would you like some coffee?"

There was no answer. Mindy shrugged, gulped her own coffee, and gathered up her training manual, handbag and a couple of notebooks. Today was the big day, she thought.

She went through to the bedroom and stood by the bathroom door.

"Bye, Rosie, I'm off. There's coffee in the pot, and cereal in the yellow tin. Turn the percolator off if you go out. Okay?"

Rose did not reply.

"Rose? Is everything all right?"

"Yes. Bye."

"Aren't you going to wish me luck? I'm the star turn today—I hope. Rose, are you sure you're okay?"

Rose's voice was muffled as she answered.

"I'm brushing my teeth. Good luck."

Mindy sighed with relief. "Thanks," she said. "See you later."

Mindy hummed tunelessly as she left the apartment, thinking of the deal with the Arabs.

Rose heard the front door slam, and let out the moan of pain she had been trying to suppress. She was lying on the tiled floor of the shower unit, doubled up in agony, her hands pulling at her stomach. She flung her arms out, and began rolling around, her head twisting from side to side.

A stab of pain shot across her stomach and she curled into a ball, stretching her neck upwards as if trying to escape from her body. Her fists were clenched tightly, but she did not feel her fingernails sinking into the palms of her hands. Never had the aching been like this.

There was no thought, just the awful, all-enveloping agony that took her to the threshold of madness.

The spasms slowly passed and, exhausted, she propped herself against the shower wall, sweating but shivering with cold at the same time. Feeling a warm, tickling sensation at her wrists she looked down and saw a thin trickle of blood curling down her arm. Opening her hand she stared at the four crescent-shaped cuts in the palm.

Slowly, as if drugged, she brought her head down to her hand, the hand which she could not identify as being her own, and licked the blood off the wrist and palm.

When the blood no longer flowed she straightened up, her face expressionless, and rested against the wall.

Within seconds, she passed out.

TEN

Mindy's head spun as she tried to memorize figures from the training manual. She was jostled on the subway platform as she ran over in her mind the technical specifications she might be asked by the Arabs.

Feeling nervous she lit a cigarette, and inhaled deeply. She was not looking forward to the morning. The train pulled in and the commuters surged forward, pushing Mindy into the carriage, still looking at her manual.

Mindy was squeezed in a corner against a door and, leaning back, she absorbed herself in technical data, descriptions of circuits, and price codings.

"Excuse me, miss," a man said, tapping her on the shoulder.

She looked up. A man in his mid-fifties, wearing a heavy overcoat, was smiling at her.

"This is a non-smoker," he said, glancing at Mindy's cigarette.

"Oh, I'm sorry," she said. "I was miles away."

"That's okay. It's just my chest. Smoke makes me cough."

Mindy nodded and stubbed her cigarette out on the floor, immersing herself once more in her book.

The train jolted to a halt mid-station, waiting for a green go-ahead signal. Mindy tapped her foot impatiently and gazed ahead trying to recall the specifications of an input module.

Then she became aware of a woman opposite, who was almost crouching by the double sliding doors. She seemed to be staring at Mindy and, with a start, Mindy realized that the woman was pouring with sweat and looked as if she was about to collapse.

A white, misty film covered the woman's eyes, which were sunk in blackened hollows, giving her the appearance of a skeleton.

As Mindy watched, the woman started trembling, her body hiccuped, and green slime began to drool from the corners of her mouth.

The other commuters, in typical fashion, stared ahead or concentrated on reading their newspapers.

Suddenly, the woman screamed loudly, and plunged forward, her mouth open wide, making directly for Mindy. Mindy dropped her manual and pushed herself closer into the corner.

Panic broke out in the carriage. People struggled to get away from the screaming woman, falling over one another. The man who had

spoken to Mindy turned to the woman and tried to put his hand up to protect himself. He was too late and she snapped at his ear, biting through the lobe.

He paused for a second, as the full implication of what she had done hit him, and then began punching her in the chest and stomach.

Two other men joined him, one pulling her to the floor, the other trying to restrain her but she bit his hand. Viciously, he kicked her in the ribs, holding his bleeding hand against his coat.

The train started moving, the carriage by that time an inferno of screaming, pushing and fighting passengers. Two men finally managed to grab the woman's arms, and another couple held her legs. She blurted out indistinct words and struggled to get free, foaming wildly at the mouth.

The tube stopped at the next station and the doors opened with a hiss. Bodies tumbled out, some falling on the platform. Mindy edged her way round the group on the floor, and rushed to safety.

Her manual lay on the floor, forgotten in the chaos.

The incident in the tube was only one of a number throughout the city. People from all walks of life suddenly went crazy and attacked those nearest them. The infection seemed to be spreading like wildfire and the Mayor called a special meeting to discuss the situation.

Representatives from the police force, the hospitals, health organizations and other interested groups sat round the long conference table as the mayor described what action he had recommended.

"It seems that the best thing we can do, acting on the advice I've been given, is to try and contain the disease before it spreads across Canada and into the United States," the mayor said.

There was no response to this obvious statement.

"So, to avoid confusion which could be brought about by overloading central administration, I have given instructions that each municipality takes on the responsibility for setting up its own vaccination centres. They can use community halls and health clinics. The council will, of course, provide any help that is necessary in the form of supplies and ensure that all requirements of the individual municipalities are met. A central register will be kept at City Hall to check the progress of the battle against this epidemic. Now are there any questions?"

The Chief of Police spoke.

"Unless all the reports I've been reading are wrong, I thought the normal rabies shots were useless against the disease. The people at the

clinic out at Camelford were given jabs but they're all dead now. I can't see the point of setting up quarantine centres," he concluded. "It's a total waste of time."

"What would you suggest, Alec?" the mayor asked politely.

"Call in the army to help us set up armed patrols and to guard the quarantine centres until the boffins have come up with a suitable vaccine. At least we can control what we've already got, instead of sending infected people back out in the streets after their shots. You'll only spread the disease that way."

The mayor, a man who was constantly aware of public feeling, shook his head.

"That'll only cause a greater panic. As soon as armed militia and police are seen wandering around, the city will go berserk . . ."

"It's going berserk already!" the policeman pointed out angrily. "We're having trouble trying to stop the violence as it is. God alone knows how we'll stop it if spreads through the city like a normal wave of flu."

"I don't think that'll happen," the mayor said. "Meanwhile, we'll go ahead on the plans as outlined. I believe that should take care of the immediate problems."

Four hours later as Montreal erupted into chaos, he changed his mind.

Claude Lapointe arrived at the City Hall as the meeting ended, after having driven through the night from Camelford. One of the Bureau officials filled him in on the mayor's plans.

"It's not good enough," Lapointe said. "It's not going to stop the spread. The Police Chief was right."

"There's nothing we can do until the mayor gives us the go-ahead," the official said.

Lapointe shrugged.

"How are the stocks of rabies vaccine?" he asked.

"We're having more flown in from the States," the Bureau man said. "We're running pretty low."

"I'll take a look at them later. First, I want to speak to the mayor."

"You'll be lucky," the official said pointedly. "He's at a meeting planning his next visit to the royal family in Britain."

Lapointe angrily stalked off looking for someone that he could get some sense out of.

The only person available was Pierre Stasiuk, the Council Secretary. Lapointe was shown into his office and told him he was worried about

the mayor's decisions.

"Don't you understand, Mr. Stasiuk," he pleaded. "This is an epidemic . . ."

"Not yet, Mr. Lapointe. Not according to the World Health Organization which defines epidemics."

Lapointe raised his hands, and looked up at the ceiling in despair.

"For God's sake, man!" he exploded. "This isn't a question of niceties and word quibbling. The city's about to burst wide open if you don't do something about it. Our rabies vaccination stock is running dangerously low, and you're suggesting that we continue wasting it. Why don't you come with me to the central warehouse and see what we've got for yourself?"

Stasiuk looked down at his diary.

"Very well, Mr. Lapointe. I can give you an hour."

"Thanks. Thanks a lot," Lapointe muttered.

A chauffeur-driven limousine took them through the city towards the warehouse. Lapointe stared glumly out of the window as the car wound its way through icy streets.

At last he could contain himself no longer.

"You'll pardon me, Mr. Stasiuk, but I think the mayor is being particularly short-sighted. He's not taking this epidemic . . . all right, outbreak . . . as seriously as he should be."

Stasiuk sighed.

"A city is a complex machine, Mr. Lapointe," he explained. "Every part needs to run smoothly and demands constant attention. The mayor *will* see you, and listen to your point of view, but you're not the only person he has to meet. It all takes time. Everything possible is being done at this moment, I can assure you."

The limousine swung off the main road and threaded its way along a rough road, leading through a deserted construction site.

"Why are we going this way?" Lapointe asked.

"There's bad ice on the ring road, sir," the driver replied. "I heard it on the radio. They've stopped traffic until they can sand the road."

Lapointe nodded and sat back.

A few minutes later, the car slowed to a stop.

"What's wrong now, Clark?" Stasiuk asked impatiently.

The driver waved at a barrier that had been placed across the narrow road.

"Don't know, sir," he shrugged. "Maybe they're moving tractors across further along."

"Mmmm . . ." Stasiuk was not convinced.

Suddenly two men appeared from behind a pile of rubble dressed in orange boiler suits spattered with mud. One of them carried a pneumatic drill, cradling it in his arms, its power cable leading off behind the mound of stones. They wore dust masks and only their eyes could be seen below the safety helmets.

“Clark, wind down the window and ask them what the delay is about,” Stasiuk said. “But be careful. It might be strike trouble.”

The driver had started to roll down the window when the man with the drill turned on the power and pushed the flat chisel against the side of the chauffeur’s door. The bit tore through the thin metal with ease.

“For Christ’s sake, Clark, get out of here! Quick man!” Stasiuk yelled.

Lapointe grabbed the official’s elbow.

“Their eyes! Look at their eyes! These men have the disease! Move! Get out of here!”

The driver tried to put the car into reverse, but the other construction worker reached through the window and pulled at his hair. The drill ripped through the inside of the car and sliced through the struggling driver’s thigh. He screamed, and the crazed man wrenched the door open. The other dropped the drill and it bounced wildly over the ground.

“They’ll kill us!” Lapointe shouted.

The men began pulling the driver out of the car, tugging as his foot became entangled in the floor controls.

Stasiuk scrambled over the front seat and slid along to the driving wheel. Kicking Clark’s foot free, he slammed the gear lever into reverse, and pressed down hard on the accelerator. The car spun backwards, the driver’s door flapping and banging madly.

Stasiuk did a three-point turn, smashing the bumper into a block of concrete, and fishtailed down the slippery dirt track.

Lapointe looked back at the men, who were crouched over the driver, their faces pressed close to the bleeding man’s wound.

Feeling sick, he turned to Stasiuk.

“Tell *that* to your bloody mayor!” he said angrily. “Now do you believe me?”

The official, gripping the wheel tightly to stop his hands shaking, nodded dumbly.

As the violence grew more widespread and the death toll increased, the mayor heard from the World Health Organization. Following

reports it had received from Canada, the WHO had decided to make the epidemic official.

Confused and shattered by recent events, the mayor cancelled his previous instructions and allowed the police and army to take whatever action they saw fit to stop the spreading insanity.

Then he resigned.

Rose woke around midday, the pain gone and her head clear. She was stiff from lying on the hard tiles and ran a deep bath to take away the tension. Turning on the radio, she wandered from room to room, thinking of nothing in particular.

The radio stations were full of the latest news of the rabies epidemic and, after trying to find a music programme, she gave up and put on a record.

Rose relaxed in the bath for about half an hour, listening to Simon and Garfunkel on the hi-fi, then she dressed and went out.

Drifting around the streets aimlessly, she finally came to a large pedestrian shopping complex built around a square. Plants and shrubs in concrete pots lined the area and a few bench seats stood in the centre. A huge Christmas tree, bright with colored lights, towered behind the seats and a pile of specially wrapped presents, donations to children's charities, were scattered around its base.

Rose sat and watched the scurry of Christmas shoppers around her, desperately aware that she was not one of them. The warmth of their presence reminded her of the walk down St. Catherine Street the night before and a longing for body contact gripped her.

Fighting the urge to touch someone, she saw two policemen patrolling round the square, carrying submachine-guns at hip level. They walked in opposite directions, maintaining contact by two-way radio.

The younger policeman paused to talk to a Santa Claus who sat on a raised throne at one end of the complex where lines of children were queuing up to receive gifts from him at fifty cents a time. A bored-looking photographer stood to the side snapping Polaroid pictures of the children on Santa's knee for another fifty cents.

Rose sighed, mixed memories of her own childhood Christmases flooding back to her. She had been raised in a typical middle-class suburb outside Toronto with her two sisters and one brother. Her father, an engineer, could be described as 'a good man'. He didn't drink or smoke and he took his family to church every Sunday.

Although his pay at the factory was not high, he refused to let his wife take an outside job, saying that 'her place and work was in the

home'. Rose, the eldest of the children, got along well with her father, but as she grew older, always seemed to be arguing with her mother.

But all in all, Rose had had a happy childhood. There were none of the traumas that other kids she met later seemed to have gone through. She had no complexes, no weird hang-ups and her sex life was confined to quick kisses and cuddles at the back of cinemas or teenage parties.

Then when she was seventeen her parents were killed in a car crash. Rose grew up fast after that, moving with her brother and sisters to live with an aunt who had never had children of her own. Rose stuck it for about six months and then left, making her way to Montreal. She'd almost lost contact with her family and the only time she saw them was at Christmas when she normally went back to Toronto.

But there was nothing normal about this Christmas, she thought.

"Mind if I sit down?" a voice interrupted her thoughts.

A young man, dressed in denims, open-neck shirt and an unbuttoned army jacket, stood in front of her.

"No, I don't mind," said Rose, looking at him as she would an animal at a zoo. Interesting, but impossible to be involved with.

"Nothing like Christmas, is there?" he smiled pleasantly.

Rose put his age at about nineteen. She glanced at him, not answering.

"It's better for the kids, mind you," he said.

Rose stared ahead.

"Mind you, it can be fun for adults as well," he went on.

Rose sighed.

The kid stared at the ground for a few seconds, trying to think of another opening line.

"Um . . . you smoke? I mean cigarettes," he laughed. "You smoke?"

"Why not," Rose answered. "Sure."

"Terrific. Have one of mine," he offered, fumbling in his jacket pocket. "Here they are. Filter," he said, shaking the soft pack in her direction. Two cigarettes fell to the floor, and the kid dived after them.

Rose smiled at his embarrassment.

"Sorry," he said, and began searching his pockets for matches.

"Ah . . . um . . . I don't seem to have any light. You got any matches on you?" he asked his face becoming flushed.

Rose shock her head.

The teenager looked around intensely.

"Ah, great. I'll just ask that guy over there with the fag. Just a sec.

Don’t go away, I’ll be right back. Okay?

“Okay, boss,” she smiled, a sparkle in her eye. This was the first situation she had genuinely enjoyed for months.

The kid walked jauntily across to the next bench, where a man sat staring ahead. Pausing, he noticed that the cigarette in the man’s hand had burnt down to his fingers, a fact which the man did not seem to notice or mind.

“ ’Scuse me, mister. Have you got a light?” He asked, leaning closer to the man and lifting the cigarette to his lips.

The man, in his sixties and with a bushy black beard, swayed slowly forward and then suddenly leaped at the kid, grabbing his hair and forcing his head back.

Green foam oozed over the man’s beard and he stared out of whitened eyes as he tore at the throat of the teenager, who was screaming for help.

The policemen, hearing the din, ran across the square, submachine-guns at the ready. The younger one reached the scene first. The diseased man, his beard wet with blood, stared at the cop and dropped the youth, who lay dying on the colored concrete.

The policeman levelled his gun at the man.

“Just hold it there, mister. Get your hands up. Fast! Above your head!”

The man looked frantically around and then broke into a run, heading towards the Santa Claus stand.

“Get out of the way!” the cop yelled. “He’s crazy! He’ll kill you! Move away!”

The lines of children scattered as the man crashed through them and jumped onto the platform. The Santa Claus caught hold of the man’s jacket and whirled round with the force of the lunatic’s headlong rush.

It was at that moment that the young cop opened fire, spraying bullets across the stand and through the two struggling men. They fell back against a display of toys and plastic Christmas trees, their bodies ripped apart by the bullets.

Terrified children screamed and cried, hugging their mothers.

The older policeman, arrived breathless, and looked at the younger man.

“What the fuck . . .” he started to say, but stopped when he saw the other policeman sink to his knees, white-faced, his mouth opening and shutting as he tried to speak.

“I . . . I . . . I . . . didn’t mean to . . . mean to kill the Santa. Oh Christ, oh Jesus Christ,” he sobbed.

A crowd gathered, looking from the bodies to the policeman. Rose, her senses temporarily numbed, fought her way through to an exit, desperate to escape.

ELEVEN

Claude Lapointe sat patiently in the VIP lounge of Montreal Airport waiting for Dr. Royce Gentry, a director of the World Health Organization, to arrive from London. A pile of newspapers lay at his side and he picked one up, shuddering inwardly at the large front page headline. ‘CRAZIES RUN RIOT IN MONTREAL’ it screamed, using a description given to infected victims by a minor police official earlier in the day. It had caught on, and television, radio and newspaper reporters referred to anyone with rabies as ‘a crazy’.

Gentry had telephoned Lapointe in the early afternoon, and informed him that scientists working on the rabies strain had come up with a preventative vaccine which would have to be administered on a national scale. Supplies and cultures were already on the way by RAF jets and transport planes as Gentry spoke.

Lapointe had then contacted the Chief of Police and given him the news, suggesting that at every vaccine centre those receiving the new shots should be issued with an identification card.

“Where the hell are we going to get them in a few hours?” the police chief asked.

“I’ve already been in touch with the Government and they’ve issued orders to every major printer in the country to produce the cards and plastic folders. We’re installing those machines that you put a dime in and get a picture out in a few minutes at the the major centres. So the card will carry a photo of the person as well. We’re taking no chances.”

“Good. I’ll get the word spread round the country,” the chief said.

Gentry’s plane arrived on time and, as they walked to the waiting car, Lapointe told him of the latest developments.

“We’re geared to giving the new vaccine,” he said. “And I think we’ve got a breakthrough. I’ve managed to trace a pattern in this mess. I’ll show you when we reach City Hall.”

As they drove towards Montreal’s centre, Lapointe explained the measures that had been taken since the epidemic had started.

In Lapointe’s temporary office at City Hall, the police, army and medical heads of Montreal were already waiting.

Lapointe did not waste time.

“I’ve called this meeting because I think I’ve discovered something very important in our fight against this killer disease,” he said.

Gentry settled back in his chair and crossed his legs, puffing slowly on his pipe.

Lapointe pointed to a large map dotted with different colored pins.

“We have charted the disease from the first case reported. As you can see,” he said, tapping the map around Camelford, “there is no doubt that the disease started here.”

Everyone in the room stared at the map.

“Camelford. That’s the key point. And that’s where the Keloid Clinic is situated. The man who ran the clinic, Dr. Keloid, became crazy two days ago, at the same time as an old farmer, Fred Atkins, went berserk.”

He turned back to the map.

“If you look at the yellow pins, which mark the progress of the disease after its initial outbreak you can see how they spread out in geometrically increasing proportions.” He breathed in deeply. “What we *don’t* know is what they were doing at the Keloid clinic which could have started all this. The records show nothing unusual. Maybe we’ll never know, but one thing *is* sure. Now that we’ve got the source pinpointed we can take controlling action to limit the spread of disease. And with the new preventative vaccine being given as of now, I think we can definitely say that we’re well on the way to getting this thing beat.”

There were sighs of relief and someone actually clapped.

“Dr. Royce Gentry of the World Health Organization has just arrived, and he’ll outline his role in liaising with Health Bureaus in Western European countries to bring this nightmare to an end.”

Gentry briefly described the massive watchdog operation that had been mounted at airports and docks to prevent the disease spreading to Europe. All visitors to Canada were being vaccinated and given ID cards.

“To date, nothing has been reported. Let’s hope it stays that way,” he concluded.

“I think that’s all for now,” Lapointe said. “We’re going across to the Atwater Metro Station to check the distribution of the new vaccine. Keep me posted if anything happens.”

At the Atwater Metro, one of the largest emergency vaccination centres, a crowd of reporters surged forward to Lapointe’s and Gentry’s car as it slowed down.

As soon as Gentry stepped out he was bombarded with dozens of questions. He put his hands up.

“One at a time, please. I can’t make out a word you’re saying.”

“In spite of the fact that the Prime Minister has not yet declared a

state of emergency, do you think that martial law is necessary in Montreal, Dr. Gentry?" asked a television reporter.

"I don't think there's any question that martial law is needed in Montreal now. There's no alternative. We know victims of the disease —and it's *not* rabies, although it's clear, it could be related to the rabies virus—we know these victims are beyond any medical help once it has established itself to the point where violent behavior takes place."

"Then what you're actually saying, Dr. Gentry, is . . ."

"What I'm saying is simple. Your viewers may not like it, but that can't be helped, I'm afraid. Shooting down the victims is probably the best method we've got. Locking them up isn't going to do any good at all. They go into a coma and die not long afterwards. This new vaccine we've got only works as a preventive, it's not a cure. So for those who've already been infected and are incubating the disease . . ." He shook his head and paused. "As far as we know there's no hope for them."

A babble of questions followed, but Gentry ran up the steps into the Metro.

The reporters rounded on Lapointe.

"What should people do now, Mr. Lapointe?" someone asked.

"Get vaccinated as soon as possible and don't go out unless it's absolutely vital," he said. "And if they do, make sure they're carrying their ID cards. The police, army and militia can demand to see them. I can't answer for the consequences if anyone's not got their ID. There may not be a national state of emergency, but there's sure as hell one here." He turned and followed Gentry into the Metro.

Hart moped about the police station all day, impatient for the evening to come when he would be cleared to leave, or 'set free' as he joked. He tried to read a few old copies of *Playboy,* but gave up after a while. One of the policemen produced a pack of cards and Hart, Cypher and a couple of cops played poker, the highest stake allowed being ten cents. Cypher still managed to win two dollars.

"Bloody businessmen," Hart moaned.

A portable television set had been set up on the sergeant's desk at the entrance to the station so they were able to keep in touch with the latest developments of the epidemic.

They watched Royce Gentry's interview at the Metro, feeling that at last something positive was being done to stop the spread of the disease. There was also some film showing police and army activity in central Montreal and pictures of emergency vaccination centres being

set up in subways, halls and municipal buildings.

“Thank God I live in the suburbs,” Cypher said. But his voice could not hide his concern. He had rung home a few times, and although his wife assured him that everything was fine, he would feel happier when he was with his family.

The last time he called his wife had told him off, saying she was trying to get out to the supermarket to buy food to cook him a meal when he got home.

Hart and Cypher, along with everyone else in the police station, were vaccinated as soon as supplies arrived early in the evening, then they had their photos taken and their ID cards issued. After that, they were told they could go.

Hart whooped with joy, and Cypher gathered his papers together.

“Good-bye, Sergeant,” Cypher said. “It’s a great hotel you run here. I’d recommend it any time.”

The sergeant laughed.

“Thanks, Murray. I’ll send the bill on. You sure you wouldn’t like to stop over a little while longer? I don’t fancy going into the city right now.”

“I would, but my wife and kid are expecting me,” Cypher said. “You know how it is with us old married men, sarge.”

Hart shifted uncomfortably from foot to foot.

“Come on, Murray. Rose is waiting for me,” he said and looked at the sergeant. “No disrespect, sarge, but I don’t think I want to come back here for a long, long, time.”

“Sure. Take it easy, you two,” the sergeant said, waving his hand at them.

Outside, an officer handed over the keys of Cypher’s car.

“Keep your window closed and the doors locked. The jab will keep the bug away from you, but it doesn’t help against the crazies.”

They nodded and moved off.

Hart smiled contentedly as they drove in the dusk. At last, he thought, at last he would soon see Rose.

It had been nearly two months since the accident. It would be great just to talk with her, laugh with her and maybe . . .

Prison cells, Hart decided, do funny things to a man. Especially when it came to women.

Rose lay naked in Mindy’s double bed, her limbs stretched out. Sweat poured off her and the blankets were twisted round her body. She started trembling and, through the hammering pain that threatened to

burst her head, she became aware of another spasm starting in her abdomen. She curled into a ball, clawing at her stomach in a frenzy of agony.

She did not hear the outside door open as Mindy arrived home.

“Rose? Are you in?” she shouted. “Boy, what a day I’ve had,” she continued without waiting for an answer, having seen Rose’s jacket lying on the hall floor. “First of all that crazy woman on the tube this morning, then these Arabs saying they wouldn’t know for sure until next week.”

She walked through the lounge as she spoke.

“You know what I need, Rosie. A bath, a nice long bath. I just . . .” she stopped at the bedroom door, shocked into silence at her friend’s state. She rushed across to the bed. Rose lay with her face to the wall.

“Oh, my God, Rosie. What’s been going on? Have you been out? Did you get your shot? Rosie, Rosie, tell me please. Where have you been today? The city’s gone crazy and if you’ve been out there . . . You haven’t been bitten have you?” a cold wave of fear passed over Mindy.

Rose rolled over and stared at Mindy, who gasped at the sight of Rose’s face. Her lips were arched, the upper one split because of dehydration. Her nose was running, and tears trickled down her cheeks.

“No . . . no, I’ve not been bitten,” Rose said, almost in a whisper. “I’m . . . I’m frightened to go out, Mindy. And I’m so . . . I’m so hungry. I’m starving to death. And I don’t want to eat. I don’t *want* any more to eat!” her voice rose, filled with hatred. She tried to sit up, but fell backwards. “I don’t want any more to eat,” she repeated softly, starting to sob.

Mindy sat on the bed and put her arms around her.

“Oh, Rosie, what’s been happening to you, baby?” she asked, her throat welling up as she tried to stop herself crying. “Oh my Rosie, what’s the matter. Who’s done this to you, you poor baby. Well, don’t worry about anything. It’s your old friend Mindy here. We’ll win through together. We’re two tough old ladies, you and me. We can handle this. See if we can’t.” she said, stroking Rose’s hair gently.

Hart’s excitement gave way to nagging fear as they neared Montreal.

“It’s . . . it’s incredible, Murray.” he said as the car started to head down a long expressway ramp into the city. “I’ve never seen anything like it.”

Cypher grunted and nodded, too stunned by what he saw to speak.

The ramp was littered with wrecked or burnt out cars, and an occasional corpse could be seen strewn across the hard shoulder. The

signs of carnage had started about ten miles from the city limits, increasing as they neared the centre.

Cypher's hope that, by living in the suburbs, his family would escape any ravages of the disease had begun to lose some of it's credibility. But at least, he told himself, he lived on the opposite side of Montreal from the one they were entering. And he hadn't seen or heard any news reports about his municipality.

They drove slowly down the long ramp which passed over criss-crossing highways and gave them a good view of the city. To the left was a large supermarket and the car was soon level with it.

Arc lights had been set up outside the main entrance to the store and lines of people patiently waited as soldiers, two at each side of the door, checked their ID cards. The guards carried light machine guns and more soldiers with regulation rifles patrolled the huge complex.

"Jesus," said Hart. "It's like we're at war, or been taken over by some enemy."

"We have, kid," muttered Cypher.

They swung off the expressway onto a practically deserted dual carriageway.

"Where we going, Murray? This is the ring road."

"I know, kid, I know," Murray said. "Look, I've just got to get to my house first. Yeah, yeah, you want to see your girlfriend. Okay, this is what I'm going to do. Once we're back at my place I'll give you the car and you can go ahead and pick up Rose. Hart, I'm not going to be able to relax until I see Cecile and Jeffrey and I know everything's fine with them. Is that okay?"

It wasn't. Hart wanted to see Rose as much as Cypher wanted to see his family. But Cypher's suggestion seemed fair.

"Sure, Murray, sure," he said tensely. "That's a great idea."

The car slowed to halt, stopping in front of a swing barrier guarded by two armed soldiers. They were outside one of the city's garbage depots and a convoy of white dustcarts roared out, pausing at the gate to check their destinations with an army sergeant. They fanned out in various directions, some passing Hart and Cypher.

White hooded figures, dressed in what appeared to be firefighting overalls, sat on top of the carts, submachine guns or rifles with telescopic sights in their gloved hands. The drivers and their mates were also totally covered in white protective clothing, the lights of the lorries reflecting off of their glass visors. The convoy dispersed and they were allowed through.

On their way to Cypher's home in Dorval the bizarre scenes became less. They drove through sleepy, tree-lined roads and the only hint

that something was wrong was the occasional *pop* of a rifle shot heard in the distance.

But these sounds were easy to ignore in the security of suburbia and Cypher cheered up as they neared his house. They pulled over beside a small garden filled with rose bushes. As Cypher left the car, Hart slipped along behind the driver's wheel.

"Everything looks fine to me, Murray," he said, looking at the house.

"They're probably sleeping," he replied, looking at the darkened house. He turned back to Hart.

"Phone me when you get to Rose, will you?" he asked. "Maybe it would be better if you brought her back here for a while until they've got this thing licked. What do you think?"

"Yeah, maybe. I'll see. Listen, thanks for the car Murray and everything else. I mean it. You've been great, really great," he said sincerely. "I'll call you. Take care."

Cypher smiled and walked up his driveway. Hart watched him open the front door, wave, and disappear inside.

Hart waved back and putting the car in gear, drove off towards downtown Montreal. And Rose.

The house was pleasantly warm and Cypher smiled as he took his coat off in the hall. A small table lamp had been left on. He walked through to the living room and switched on the light.

"Cecile? It's Murray. I'm home, darling."

There was no answer, the only sound being the quiet gurgling of the central heating in the radiators.

She must be sleeping, he thought. Couldn't wait up for me.

Cypher went back into the hall and stood at the foot of the stairs.

"Cecile? I'm back. Where are you honey?"

There was an ominous silence. Trying not to panic, Cypher looked over his shoulder at the living-room once more. The room was as tidy as usual with no signs of any disturbance.

His heart pounded as he slowly climbed the stairs. His hands felt clammy and he broke out in a cold sweat.

"Cecile, love," he called. "Are you sleeping? I'm home. It's Murray."

There was no reply and he moved along the narrow corridor at the top the stairwell. Stopping at the baby's room, he pushed the door open and looked in.

Everything was as usual. A large toy-box, crammed with soft dolls, teddy bears and plastic cars stood under the window. Shelves filled

with more toys and picture books lined the walls covered with nursery paper. A deep blue wall-to-wall carpet lay on the floor.

Cypher glanced over at the cot and saw it was empty. He smiled nervously. Sleeping with Cecile again, he reckoned. Whenever Cypher was away on trips, Jeffrey slept with his mother in the large double bed.

He was about to turn away when he heard a soft splashing sound coming from the room. Snapping on the light, he went into the nursery.

The baby's bath rested on its stand, leaking water from the base. Impulsively, Cypher moved forward and reached for the bath cover. Pausing for a few seconds, he forced himself to lift the lid up.

The bath was half-filled with bloody water which had been dripping slowly on to the carpet. Jeffrey lay face down, floating on the surface.

Cypher dropped the lid, a sudden thrust of disgust and horror stabbing him in the stomach. His strength drained from him and he began to sink to the floor, his mind trying to push out the truth, refusing to believe what he had just seen.

Clutching the side of the bath, he knelt in front of it, his throat a solid lump, tears welling in his eyes.

A low wailing sound came from behind him, and he twisted round to see what it was. No one was there, but the insane moaning continued, turning into a hysterical giggling.

The sound came from a large closet, used to store the baby's blankets and clothes. Murray staggered, trancelike, towards it, his hand reaching out for the doorknob.

He had just touched the handle when the closet doors burst open, knocking Cypher backwards and flinging him to the floor.

Cecile, her mouth drooling thick green saliva and her eyes two masks of fog, pounced on him and began biting his face.

Cypher felt the searing pain in his cheek but by that time he had no will left to resist.

TWELVE

Hart drove as fast as conditions allowed through Montreal, often stopping as soldiers or police held up traffic. The white garbage trucks with their armed guards on top cruised everywhere. Machine gun posts had been set up at strategic corners, on roofs and around the vaccination centres.

It would take nearly half-an-hour, Hart estimated, before he reached Mindy's apartment. He switched on the radio to catch up on the latest information about the epidemic.

". . . and now," said the announcer, "we take you over to City Hall, where we've just had some news of a new and exciting development in the fight against this epidemic which is gripping Montreal in a night of unprecedented terror."

A woman's voice came over.

"I'm with Dr. Royce Gentry, a Director of the World Health Organization, who's just given waiting reporters some startling news. Dr. Gentry, could you repeat what you've said for our listeners, please?"

"Yes, certainly," Gentry's cultured English voice purred over the radio. "After using some elaborate tracking procedures and applying them to a map we have in fact proved that the disease has a definite, and specific point of origin."

"Which is . . . ?"

"Which is the Keloid Clinic of Cosmetic Surgery, a few miles outside Camelford."

Hart, waiting for a set of traffic lights to change, gripped the steering wheel tightly feeling uneasy at what he'd heard. He turned the volume up, concentrating on the broadcast.

". . . everything has spread out from the clinic," Gentry was saying.

"What does this mean, Dr. Gentry?" the interviewer asked.

"Well we would say that given this fact, in conjunction with certain other statistics we have, there is special factor at work in the spread of the disease."

"Do you mean a carrier?"

"I don't want to start off any useless witch hunt, but yes. That's what I do mean. Someone like the notorious Typhoid Mary. That is, someone who incubates the disease, carries it around and can pass it onto others, but is immune from it."

“What exactly were they doing at the Keloid Clinic, Dr. Gentry?”

“It’s difficult to say exactly. We’ve had some trouble finding out. But we do know what it *wasn’t,*” he stressed. “It had nothing to do with germ warfare or secret government work . . .”

Hart’s concentration was shattered by the sudden appearance of a man from the side of the car. He was drooling at the mouth and staring at Hart through the window. The crazy tried to pull the door open but, finding it locked, jumped on the bonnet, and began clawing at the windscreen, screaming indistinct curses at Hart.

A sharp cracking sound came from the right, the crazy arched forward against the screen and then slumped over the bonnet, blood pouring from a wound in his back.

Hart glanced across the street, and saw an army sniper, dressed in white, on the roof of a furniture store.

As if from nowhere, two other men in white overalls and masks appeared. One pulled the dead man off the bonnet, while the other raised his hand, signalling Hart not to move.

He sprayed the car with a white foam and then rubbed it down with a sponge, removing the crazy’s blood from the windscreen and bonnet. Then he waved the car on.

Hart, staggered by the speed of the incident, moved off, wondering if he was dreaming.

Nearing Mindy’s block, he forgot the horrific scenes as his excitement increased at the thought of seeing Rose. But since hearing Gentry’s broadcast, an ugly and unspeakable suspicion had been creeping across his mind which he refused even to think about.

At last the tower block came into view. Hart pulled into the side and sat in the car for a few seconds, trying to control his emotions.

Which, if he had been honest with himself, were basically those of panic.

Mindy pottered about the kitchen preparing a complicated vegetable stew. She was convinced that Rose’s long stay at the clinic had brought about a strange change in her. The only reason Rose couldn’t eat was because of her accident when she saw blood all over the place. This, reasoned Mindy, had produced an obsessive dislike for meat in her. Which was the reason for the elaborate vegetable stew.

She had put Rose to bed and placed a cold compress on the sick girl’s head.

By the time she wakes up, Mindy thought, stirring the stew, this’ll be ready. She began clearing up the kitchen, humming along to the radio which was on low volume, to avoid disturbing Rose.

Rose lay awake in the bedroom, the aching hunger which filled her becoming unbearable. She took the compress from her head and flung it to the side.

Slipping quietly out of bed, she found her clothes in a heap on the floor where she'd left them and dressed, taking care to make no noise. She heard Mindy moving about the kitchen and carefully opened the bedroom door.

Mindy stood over the sink, her back to Rose, washing dishes. Rose sneaked out and tiptoed across the front room to the small hall. She had just reached the door when Mindy turned round.

"Rose! I didn't know you were awake. What are you doing?" she asked.

Rose pulled the door open and was about to leave when Mindy ran after her.

"Rose! You can't go out there. It's dangerous. God knows what'll happen to you. Come back inside," she said, wiping her hands on her apron.

Rose, weak from hunger and pain stared at Mindy, the pounding in her head making her dizzy.

"Mindy, I don't feel well," she moaned. "So hungry . . . so hungry . . ."

Mindy put her arms round Rose's waist and pulled her inside the hall.

"Oh, Mindy, Mindy, not you. Please not you," Rose whimpered, falling against the girl, her strength completely gone. She sinking to the floor.

Mindy, unable to take Rose's weight, slowly sank with her, falling to her knees. Rose slumped forward, tears running over her cheeks.

"Oh, please, Mindy. I don't want it to be you," she cried.

"Don't be silly," Mindy said, hugging Rose close to her. "Who else would it be but your best friend. Stop this crazy talk, Rose. I'll take care of you, don't worry."

"Oh, Mindy, the pain. I ache all over, from the inside out. It's awful, awful."

"What you need then is a nice hot bath," she said, pulling Rose's jacket off. "I'll go and run one and you can soak in it for as long as you like. It'll make you feel better, you'll see."

She started to unbutton the shirt that she'd lent Rose. Rose did not resist, but knelt as if hypnotized.

As Mindy reached up to slip the shirt over Rose's shoulder, Rose suddenly caught her arm and pressed it tightly under her left armpit.

Mindy felt something sharp bore its way through her forearm and

she tried to pull away. But Rose forced her back to the floor, pinning her down. Mindy tried to scream but Rose had her hand over her throat and no sound came out.

Within the space of a minute, she blacked out.

Rose lay hunched over Mindy, feeling her friend's blood flow into her body, bringing with it the strength she so desperately needed.

It was at that point Hart appeared in the open doorway.

Rose could not move for a moment at the shock of seeing him. The blood-sucking organ under her arm continued pumping life out of Mindy into her.

Hart stared in disbelief at the tube, his eyes bulging with horror.

"It's . . . it's you," he stammered. "It's been you all the time."

Rose straightened up, pulling the organ out of Mindy's arm and backed away.

"It's not my fault, Hart," she said quietly. "It's not my fault."

"You're the one," Hart said, still too stupified to move. "You've caused it all."

"What are you talking about?" asked Rose, trying to button her shirt, as the organ, still dripping blood, slipped back into its sheath.

"You carry the plague. You've killed hundreds of people, Rose," he said.

Rose shook her head.

"No . . . no . . . I didn't. It can't be me. You don't know what you're talking about. You've got it all wrong. I'm still me. I'm still Rose."

"What did they do to you at the clinic? What did those mad bastards turn you into?"

"I have to have blood!" she flared. "It's all I can eat! And it's your fault, Hart, not mine. You had the crash, not me. It's your fault!"

Hart stepped forward and held her shoulders.

"Rose!" he snapped. "We've got to get help. There must be some way this can be fixed. The police, the hospitals, someone . . ." he pleaded.

Rose shook off his grip and shrank away from him, hatred in her eyes.

"No . . . no . . . no . . ." she mumbled, and turning, dashed out of the door into the corridor.

"Rose! Don't go! I'm sorry. I didn't mean it. Wait . . ." he stumbled after her, almost tripping over Mindy's body.

He chased her down the corridor, through the swing doors which led to the emergency stairs at the back of the block.

He seized her by the arm and swung her round.

"Rose, you've got to listen to me. You're right. It is my fault. We're in this together. Let's fight it . . ."

Rose struggled to be free of him. Bringing her arm up, she smashed her elbow into his face.

"Rose!" he screamed as he fell backwards down the metal stairs. He cartwheeled over, banging his head several times on the edges of the steps, landing in a crumpled heap at the bottom, a thin gash of blood at the side of his forehead.

It was a few seconds before Rose could move. Her immediate reaction was to run back to the corridor, but then instinct forced her to walk heavily down the stairs, grasping the bannister for support.

Thinking she had killed him, Rose was terrified to go near Hart. But as she approached him she saw he was still breathing. Smiling, she ran down the last few steps and knelt beside him.

Gently, she ran her fingers over his face, avoiding the nasty bruises which were beginning to appear. She stroked his hair and felt the heat from his body, the body she had known so well before the accident. Hart seemed a million memories away, someone she had known in a time forgotten.

She leaned over him and cupped his face in her hands, pressing her breasts on his chest.

Then, slowly and deliberately, she bent forward and kissed him on the lips.

She stood up, took a last look at Hart, and lightly skipped down the steps to the ground floor.

Stepping into the foyer, she saw a young man sitting at the mail box, sifting through a pile of letters.

He looked up, surprised to see anyone come out of the side exit. Rose smiled at him, not sure what to say.

"Hi, there," the man said. "You gave me a bit of a shock. Didn't think anyone used the stairs any more. Is the lift out of order?"

"I . . . I felt like the exercise," Rose replied, still smiling.

"I've seen you around before, haven't I? I used to live here—just moved out, as a matter of fact—but the post office keeps sending my mail here," he lifted the letters in his hand. "Waste of time collecting these. They're all bills."

"I'm a friend of Mindy Newman. I was meant to go out with her tonight, but she doesn't appear to be in," Rose said.

"I wouldn't go out if I were you," the man said, shaking his head. "It's not safe to walk the streets. Have you been vaccinated yet?"

Rose shook her head.

"Me neither. My brother went for his this afternoon. Told me he had

to wait for three hours and then the damned photo machine broke down and he had to hang about for another half-an-hour. So I said forget it, who's got the time? Anyway, it'll all be over soon once they get rid of the crazies," he said. "But you shouldn't go wandering about the streets until the police give the go-ahead."

Rose looked worried.

"Listen, I don't know you . . ."

"I'm Dave. Dave Charlton." he stood up and stretched out his hand. "Pleased to meet you . . . eh . . ."

"Rose," she said, shaking his hand. "Listen, Dave, you've got me worried now. I don't know where Mindy has got to and I was meant to be staying the night with her. I just came in from out of town, you see, and I need a place to stay. I don't fancy walking to the bus station after what you've said, and to be honest, I don't even want to take a bus."

"I don't blame you, Rose," he said.

"Could I possibly stay with you, until Mindy shows up at least. Just for a while, Dave? Please," she asked with the voice of a pleading little girl.

Dave shrugged and looked at the floor nervously.

"I guess you could but . . . eh, I'm a single guy. It would just be the two of us. Wouldn't that bother you?"

Rose smiled innocently, her eyes wide and sparkling, and shook her head.

"Well that's it. I'll look after you until you can get in touch with Mindy. I promise not to attack you—not for the first hour, anyway," he laughed and took her hand, leading her out of the building to his car parked next to the sidewalk.

He lived only a few blocks away and they were soon in his small batchelor pad. He turned on the hi-fi set, and offered Rose a drink.

"Thank you. A brandy would be lovely," she said.

Dave scratched his head. "Brandy, brandy. Yes! There's some left from last Christmas. My father gave me a bottle as a present."

He rooted around at the bottom of a large cupboard, and pulled out a half-empty bottle of five-star brandy.

He poured out two glasses, and sat beside Rose on a modern two-seater couch, "basically designed for one," he joked, squeezing up next to her.

Rose sipped the brandy slowly, wondering if Hart would be all right.

"Cold?" Dave asked.

“No. Why?”

“You’ve got your jacket on.”

“I’m sorry, I forgot,” she laughed, putting her drink down on a small table and slipping out of the jacket.

Dave was on her right, so there was no way he could see the blood stain under her left arm.

They sat and talked about everything and anything for an hour, Dave filling the glasses twice more.

Eventually, Rose put her hand on Dave’s thigh.

“You are nice, you know. You kept your promise.”

“Promise? What promise?”

“Not to attack me for the first hour,” she reminded him. They both laughed.

Dave seemed fidgety, unsure what to say or do next.

“Come here, you big idiot,” Rose said taking her hand away from his leg and pulling his head towards her.

They kissed, long and hard. Rose took his hand and laid it on her breasts, pressing it on them.

Dave broke for breath and then, kissing her once again, began moving his hand across her in circular, rubbing motions.

She slid down the couch a little, spreading her legs in front of her. Dave took this as a sign and began to unbutton her shirt, hesitantly at first, and then more confidently.

When he had opened her shirt to the waist, he pulled his own shirt off. Rose smiled coyly and allowed herself to slip to the floor, lying with her hands at her sides, looking up with wide, pleading eyes.

Dave fell on top of her, kissing her face, neck and breasts. She put her arms round him, clasping her hands behind his back.

He was nibbling her ear, when he felt it. A hard, sharp pain, like the end of an ice-pick in his side, below his right shoulder. He tried to move, but couldn’t, finding himself in the grip of a bear-hug, the strength of which he had never experienced before.

Opening his mouth to shout, he felt Rose squeeze his back tighter, forcing the breath out of his lungs, and he could only gasp with pain.

By the time Rose relaxed her grip, he had slumped on top of her, oblivious to any sensation.

Rose lay still for about ten minutes, until her body felt satisfied, and the freak growth under her arm, bloated with blood, slid back into its sheath.

She half-dragged, half-carried Dave to the couch and propped him on it, before going to the front door and checking it was locked. Going

back to the lounge she looked around for the telephone and, finding it next to a television set, she carried it across to a small dining-table. Turning off the lights, except for a small side lamp, she sat down, her back to Dave.

Then she waited.

Hart's head felt as if it was disintegrating as he gradually regained consciousness. Rubbing his neck, he looked at the stairs stretching up before him, thinking he could never make it to the top.

Staggering to his feet, he painfully hauled himself up, taking one slow step at a time, clinging on to the railing.

He reached the corridor landing and, supporting himself against the wall, dragged himself along to Mindy's apartment. He heard the incessant ringing of a telephone which became louder as he approached the flat.

"Mindy . . . Mindy . . . are you here?" he panted, over the sound of the phone.

There was no answer and he shuffled through to the main room, noticing the bedroom door had been flung back. The flat was deserted and he thought fleetingly of Mindy, now a crazy, wandering the streets.

Ignoring the jarring ring, Hart picked up a bottle of brandy from a table and swigged back a mouthful. He waited a few seconds, letting the drink partially ease his battered body and clear his mind. Then he answered the phone.

"Hart? Is that you Hart?" he heard Rose ask.

He tried to clear the fugginess in his head.

"Yes, yes. Where are you?"

"I'm glad I managed to get you," she said, ignoring his question. "Are you feeling okay? I was so worried. Did I hurt you?"

She spoke softly, not wanting to wake Dave, who was still sleeping on the couch behind her.

"Rose, tell me where you are," insisted Hart. "We should be together. You can't cure this thing on your own. Come on, baby, tell me where you are. I'll come and get you. I promise. I've got a car downstairs, and we . . ."

"What you said hurt me, Hart," she interrupted. "It scared me. I was frightened that what you said might be true. And if it was true, then I couldn't take it. I couldn't live with that knowledge. It would mean . . . it would mean that I killed all these people. And Mindy . . . if you're right, I murdered Mindy."

“Don’t talk of murder, Rose,” Hart said, his head beginning to clear. “You haven’t broken the law. There’s not a court in the country that would convict you. Do you understand?”

“So I decided to carry out an experiment just to prove that you’re wrong, Hart,” she went on, as if he had never spoken. “What was needed was positive action. Going to the police or hospital would do no good. They’d just lock me up, not give me a chance to show I’m innocent. Now that’s good thinking, isn’t it, Hart?”

“There’s no need to go through this. We can find out together,” he said, running his hand through his hair in despair.

“No, we can’t Hart,” she said sadly. “I’ve got to do this on my own. You know that, don’t you? That’s why I found myself a partner for my test. He’s a single guy, normal, healthy and he hasn’t had this vaccine everyone’s getting. He was perfect, and so I took some of his blood, not too much, but enough. Now we’re locked in his apartment and I’m going to stay here with him until he wakes and I’m sure he’s not going to get sick. Then I’ll know you’re wrong, and I’m not the one who started it all. And when it’s over, Hart, we can . . .”

“Rose! Tell me where you are!” Hart shouted down the phone in desperation. “You’re committing suicide!”

“Hart, stay with me now. Even over the phone I want you. We can live together through the phone. We can do that for a while, can’t we Hart? Only until I find out one way or another. Then everything’ll be fine.”

“Oh, Jesus, Jesus,” Hart almost wept. “How long . . . how long ago did you take the blood?”

“About six hours ago. Could be seven,” she said.

“Christ, Rose, you’ve got to get out of there now. Please leave.” he begged.

Rose didn’t answer, but held the phone close to her lips, smiling wistfully. She heard a noise behind her, and twisted round to see Dave rising off the couch, a menacing black figure in the dimly-lit room.

Dave moved towards her, swaying slightly, his arms hanging limply at his sides. Rose did not move, the phone dangling loosely in her hands.

As Dave edged into the pool of light, Rose saw his eyes, two dead, white orbs surrounded by blackened, disease-ridden skin. Green saliva oozed from his mouth and his lips hung slack and hungry.

An icy fear gripped her. In an instant, a terrifying moment of madness, Rose knew Hart had been right.

“Hart,” she screamed. “I’m frightened.”

Dave seemed to hang suspended over her for a moment before

raising his arms and lunging at Rose's throat.

Hart heard the gurgling scream at the other end and the sound of the receiver being dropped.

Almost insane with frustration, he listened to the sounds of Rose being attacked by the maniac. Sobbing, he screamed down the phone, unable to take it from his ear, words tumbling out incoherently, trying to drown out the horror that was taking place at the other end of the line, hoping somehow it would stop.

But there was no respite, no halt to the hellish nightmare. Hart picked up the phone, and sinking to his knees, smashed the handpiece against the receiver, trying somehow to kill the image that he had in his mind, the image of Rose being torn apart.

Exhausted, his mind tortured to breaking-point, he collapsed on top of the wrecked phone and slipped into a whirlpool of black unconsciousness.

Two hours later he woke, numbed beyond emotion. He walked out of the apartment, staring blankly ahead. Taking the lift to the ground floor, he headed for the exit, and left the building.

He wandered through the streets like a zombie, not feeling the cold of the grey dawn. Not feeling anything.

No one would know the secret he carried. For he had sworn to himself he would never talk of it.

The white garbage truck trundled slowly through the deserted streets of early morning Montreal. The sniper on the roof banged his fist on top of the cabin and the truck stopped. The sniper raised his telescopic rifle and aimed at a dog sniffing round the blood-covered body of a girl. He squeezed the trigger and the animal was flung back a few feet, its side torn open.

Two other men jumped down from the truck and approached the body, spraying it with disinfectant before carrying it across to the back of the dustcart and pitching it in. One of the men pulled a lever and the pneumatic compressor hissed down, grinding and crushing the corpse into fragments.

The truck moved off, clearing the streets of any remaining crazies.

Neither of the men had noticed the odd-shaped wound under the girl's left arm.

POSTSCRIPT

The Keloid Clinic of Cosmetic Surgery was sold to a young plastic surgeon from Toronto who had been doing some exciting work in the

field of neutral field grafts. Louise, the theatre nurse, was admitted to a mental home, hopelessly insane. Fred Atkins' wife returned to the farm, took one look at it, and sold it to the first bidder. Claude Lapointe was made a Director of the Quebec Bureau of Health and mentioned in the Queen's honors list. Mindy Newman was shot dead as she tried to attack the driver of a car.

Hart Read disappeared.

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